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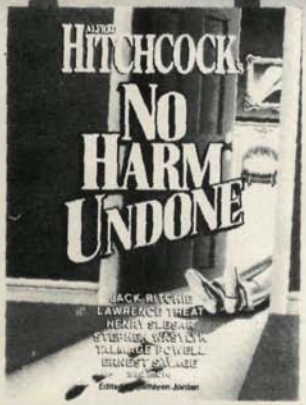

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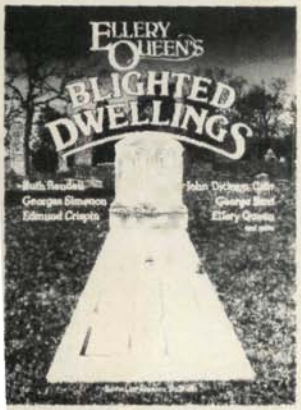

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a *NEW* Inspector Ghote story by

H. R. F. KEATING

The idea for this fine new Ghote story came to Henry Reymond Fitzwalter Keating (he likes to be called Harry) when he was in the hospital after surgery for a broken knee he suffered in a fall on his basement stairs at home. On his return home, he typed it sitting some distance from the typewriter—as necessary to accommodate his full-leg cast, as relentless about his work against odds as his intrepid Inspector Ghote . . .

NIL BY MOUTH, INSPECTOR GHOTE

by H. R. F. KEATING

Inspector Ghote ought, as he entered the guarded Cabin No. 773 in the big noisy hospital, to have looked first of all at the criminal lying on the bed there, his kneecap shattered. But instead his eye was caught for some reason by the boldly printed card fastened to the top of the white tubular iron bedhead. NIL BY MOUTH it said in thick black capitals in English, with below in Devanagari script the same warning repeated in more immediately comprehensible terms NO FOOD OR DRINK ALLOWED.

He turned to the Sister, neat in her starched white headdress and white overall with smart epaulettes, its cotton belt fastened with a wide metal buckle. "Please," he said, "what for is it that he is not allowed food? Is it on police orders? We are wanting him to talk, you know."

The Sister looked shocked.

"No, no," she said. "This man is a patient in hospital, whatever he may have done outside. Here it is Resident Medical Officer's

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orders that count only. Patient is in Nil by Mouth condition because operation is to take place at six pip emma today."

She turned away and stamped out, as if to re-emphasize that here within hospital walls it was the medical staff who gave orders not any policewalla.

And then Ghote looked at the man he had come to see, had come to interrogate. Ram Dharkar, small-time goonda. But small-time muscleman who worked for a very, very big-time gang boss, the mystery man believed to be behind twenty-five well organized bank dacoities in the past nine months. The man no one in Crime Branch had been able to get near.

But now, thanks to Ram Dharkar, they stood a chance. Because Dharkar had been found only five or six hours ago lying unconscious on a rubbish heap near the foul-smelling Chandanwadi Electric Crematorium, with his right knee smashed to pieces by a heavy lump of concrete left bloodily beside him. A clear case of a supposed informer having been punished and left as a lesson for any other gang member or hanger-on who might be thinking greedily of the large reward the banks of Bombay had, at last, collaborated to offer.

And the beauty of it was that Ram Dharkar had not been an informer at all. So, rightly aggrieved, he ought to be ready to talk and talk.

Ghote, who had been waiting for him to recover consciousness, sitting for hours down in the crowded, echoing entrance hall of the big hospital on a hard bench underneath a strident notice saying OPD CASE NOTES WILL BE ISSUED FROM 7.30 A.M.—whatever that meant—had now at last been given the news by a white-capped ward-boy that Dharkar was in a condition to be interviewed.

He followed the boy through long, clackingly shrill corridors, up one wide stone staircase and down another, to a nursing station where he had been handed over to the starchy Sister, who had taken him to Cabin No. 773 and Ram Dharkar—Ram Dharkar surely ready to talk, lying helpless on the bed within.

"Well, Ram," Ghote said to him, "you and I know each other of old, isn't it?"

The goonda on the bed made no reply, eyeing Ghote sullenly though wakefully.

"And how are you feeling?" Ghote asked, showing as much friendly concern as he could. "The knee, it is giving pain, no?"

Again Ram Dharkar did not respond.

Ghote pulled up a sagging-seated grey canvas chair he had spotted

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in a corner by the little room's sole narrow window. He sat himself down and leaned toward the injured man, who was, true enough, looking as if he was in not a little pain.

"Right, then," he said, "let us be getting down to business. The Dada of your gang decided you were betraying one and all, isn't it? Well, we are damn well knowing such is not so. And the Dada, whoever he is, ought to be knowing as much also. Ram Dharkar was never a kabari."

He looked for some sign of stirred pride in the goonda's lined face.

But there was nothing. Only that same sullen single expression.

He cleared his throat a little.

"No," he said, feeling the falsity of the note of cheerfulness he was endeavoring to inject into his voice. "No, that fellow should have known you better, Ram bhai. And look what he was doing to you instead. They tell me that however well is going the operation you are soon to have you will find difficulty to walk for the rest of your life."

No reaction.

Ghote sat and thought.

This he had not expected. The situation had seemed to him quite straightforward. The Dada behind the bank dacoities had made a mistake—his first and only mistake, but a big one. He had had Ram Dharkar cruelly punished for something he had not at all done. So, surely Ram Dharkar would be avid for revenge. And revenge was there. He knew, he must know, who the Dada was and where he could be found. He had only to say and his chance to pay back the man who had had him crippled would be one hundred percent secured.

But here the fellow was, obstinately silent. Saying nothing.

Ghote's glance fell again on the bedhead notice. NIL BY MOUTH. Yes, that was what Ram Dharkar was so unexpectedly giving him, nil by mouth. Absolutely nil.

But why? Why?

And then he thought he had it.

"You are afraid?" he asked the goonda abruptly. "Afraid if you are talking the Dada will finish off the job he was beginning?"

Ram Dharkar still did not reply. But his expression of stony nothingness changed. His eyes said yes.

"But that is not so," Ghote assured him eagerly. "Think, man, where you are. You are in one of the biggest hospitals in Bombay. You are in a cabin on your own. There is a constable on guard just

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outside that door. He has orders to let in just only two nurses and one doctor. You cannot be more safe."

He thought then, from the faintly pensive expression on Ram Dharkar's face, that he had taken all this in and was at least considering it.

But no.

"Inspector, I do not dare."

The words were croaked out. Yet Ghote took heart from them. At least the fellow was communicating. With patience and luck, he might be persuaded before long that it was safe to take the revenge that lay so easily in his power. The chances of any gang executioner sent by the Dada getting to his possible betrayer were 100-to-one against. More even.

And almost at once Ram Dharkar showed that he had committed himself to more than that one negative sentence.

"Inspectorji," he said, his voice a little stronger. "Get us a drink, no? I am thirsty-thirsty like hell."

Ghote looked at the Nil by Mouth notice.

"Oh, I cannot do that, man," he said. "You are having operation soon and it is medical advice that you must take nothing before."

"But a drink only. A little water. Inspectorji, it is damn hot in here. I am wanting just only one swallow of water. That cannot be doing any harm."

Ghote wondered whether this in fact might not be true. Surely a single gulp of pure water would not make the operation due in five hours' time altogether dangerous?

He looked around the narrow cabin. But there was no jug of water or earthenware chatti to be seen. And sure enough the little room was appallingly hot.

"Well," he said, glancing at the door, "perhaps—"

But at that moment the door was pushed open and the two nurses presumably permitted to enter came in, wheeling a small trolley consisting of a padlocked metal chest on a stand.

"Dharkar, Ram," said the more senior of the two. "Medication has been ordered."

She took a key from the bunch at her waist and solemnly unlocked the metal chest. Ghote saw that its interior was lined with pill bottles and jars by the dozen. The nurse consulted a sheet of paper and then selected one of the bottles.

"Excuse me," Ghote said, prompted by a lingering resentment at the way the medical staff assumed that they and they only had a

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God-given right to do what they wanted when they wanted. "Excuse me, but isn't it that this man is in Nil by Mouth condition?"

The nurse turned toward him, eyes sparking. "Are you saying we do not know our duty?" she snapped. "Tests have been carried out. Patient is not fit for immediate operation. The heart rate must be brought down."

She turned to her colleague, showing her the label on the pill bottle.

"Digoxin 250 micrograms," she said.

"Digoxin 250 micrograms," the other nurse confirmed.

"One every four hours."

"One every four hours."

The senior nurse poured a little water from a vacuum flask in the medicines chest into a small plastic glass, handed Ram Dharkar a single white pill and the glass, and watched him swallow the pill down.

When the pair of them had left, Ghote turned to the injured goonda again.

"Well," he said, "you have had your taste of water after all."

"And it is making it bloody worse," Ram Dharkar responded. "It is like giving a starving man one corner of a sweetmeat only."

"Well," Ghote answered, "I suppose you must endure it. They did not take away that notice above your head."

"But, Inspectorji, it is hot-hot. Feel only how hot I am."

Ghote bent forward and took the goonda's calloused hand. It was thickly wet with sweat. "Yes," he said. "Yes, you are hot. Even I am also."

He glanced round the little room. Not even a fan to be seen. "I tell you what," he said. "I would see if I can open that window."

He got up and went across to the narrow, opaque-glass affair. For a moment he wondered whether he had been sensible to make the offer. With the window open could Ram Dharkar, afraid for his life, make his escape through it should he himself have to leave the guarded cabin before he had finally got hold of that name? The fellow might think of it. He might. And then they would have lost their one golden opportunity.

But that was nonsense. Dharkar with his smashed kneecap would be totally incapable of getting through a window as narrow as this.

Ghote thrust up its lower frame.

But nevertheless, having done so, he could not prevent himself

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putting his head out and making a careful survey of the escape possibilities.

No, he decided after a long look round, it really was safe enough. True, the window did overlook a lane inside the huge hospital compound. But, though technically at ground-floor level, it was in fact quite high up. A beggar, or some such, sitting crouched against the wall below, a piece of gunny laid out beside him to collect alms, looked from above quite small, his dirty-haired head like a dried coconut with the stump of one outthrust leg—the fellow must be a leper, perhaps a patient from another department—looking like one of the flat bats dhobis used to beat washing clean. There was, certainly, a drainpipe running up the wall nearby, and an active man could probably scramble down that to the ground. But Ram Dharkar was the very opposite of an active man. No, it was safe enough.

Ghote turned from the window. Air less humidly hot than that in the room did seem to be drifting in.

"Better, heh?" he said to Ram Dharkar. "Cooler, no?"

The goonda grunted unwilling assent.

"But all the same," he said, "I am wanting-wanting something to drink."

"Well, we would be seeing about that perhaps later," Ghote answered with vague helpfulness. "But now. Now let us talk about the man who had that done to your knee."

"No."

"But—"

"No, no, Inspectorji. I tell you he is not a person to be playing with, that one. If he had one idea that I had given his name, or that I was thinking only—why, if he knew I was just only talking with you now—then it would be the finish of me straightaway."

"But think, man. How could he do that? When you are here, police guarded, in this hospital?"

"I am not knowing how. But I am knowing that he would do it."

"But revenge. You could be taking revenge for what he has done. Give us his name only, and where we could find him, and in one hour, in one half hour, he would be behind the bars and you, you would be here laughing."

But Ram Dharkar merely turned his head away and lay silent.

Ghote sat on his uncomfortably sagging chair beside the bed and tried to think of some new line to take. But he felt that with every passing minute his chances of catching onto the injured goonda's

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desire for revenge—and surely, surely, he had that—were getting less.

At last the fellow stirred and gave a weary moan.

"So hot," he said.

"Yes, it is hot. And if it had not been for your Dada you would not be here sweating it out, in pain, and on a crutch for the rest of your life also. So what is his name, man? What is his name?"

"A drink. I would give anything for one good, long, cool drink. Thandai, Inspector. You are knowing thandai?"

"Yes," Ghote answered, trying for a new bond of sympathy. "When I was a young man often I was taking thandai at that place at Kalba Devi where they are making specially. And very good it was, that milk, the ice crushed in and the mixed flavors—almond, pistachio, rose water, melon seeds. Oh, yes."

"And, Inspectorji, something else also?"

The injured goonda's voice had taken on a note of girlish coyness.

"Ah," Ghote said with a little laugh, "the bhang that fellow is putting in sometimes, eh? The stuff that sends you into a nice, nice dream."

"That is it, Inspector. That is it. Ah, what would I not give at just only this moment for a long, long drink of bhang thandai."

And then an idea came into Inspector Ghote's head, an altogether wrong idea. But an idea of insidious appeal.

For a while he fought it down. He tackled Ram Dharkar once more, putting to him again all the arguments he had offered before. He could think of no others. But all his efforts seemed to be wasted. The goonda lay there on the bed, his face blankly inexpressive, occasionally letting out almost against his will a groan of pain and frustration.

Then, brutally interrupting, right in the middle of one of Ghote's most complex and most persuasive sentences, the fellow spoke again.

"Oh, shut up, shut up," he said. "What for are you going on and on? There is one thing only I am wanting, that bhang thandai. That only."

And Ghote succumbed.

"Very well," he said. "If I am going out and smuggling in for you as big a drink of thandai as you have ever seen in your life, will you in exchange give me that name?"

The offer certainly got to the injured goonda. Ghote could positively see him swallowing down in anticipation that long, cool, refreshing, and peach-bringing drink.

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And, he thought, damn it all, that nurse said the operation had been delayed. So what real harm could there be in letting the fellow have something solid to drink? They must have left that Nil by Mouth card up there by mistake. He was not really endangering the man's life by letting him have his thandai.

But would the fellow accept the offered bribe? Would he?

"Big-big? Double size?"

The bait had been taken. Right or wrong, it was to be done now.

And, perhaps, when he got back—getting the stuff was going to take him some little time—that notice would have been removed from the bedhead and Ram Dharkar would be able to have as much "by mouth" as he liked. And if bhang would hardly be permitted by the hospital authorities, it would not do the fellow much harm. Might even do good, ease the pain.

"All right, my friend, I am off now. About half an hour, a little more perhaps. And you be thinking what you would be telling, no? Every detail you are able to remember. Then there will be no mistake in nabbing that Dada of yours."

In fact, it took Ghote rather more than an hour to complete his errand. He realized first that he would need a good container to get the stuff into Ram Dharkar's cabin unobserved, something that would fit into his own briefcase. That took him some time to find amid the high-piled shops of Lohar Chawl, with their heaps of crockery and glassware in orderly mounds, their bright plastic buckets piled in man-high towers, their steel or aluminium glasses in carefully constructed pyramids, their electric hotplates and toasters tempting the middle classes, and the pushing, gawping crowds buying and not buying, beating down prices and paying too much.

But at last he found a flat plastic flask with a screw top that looked as if it would hold a really sizeable amount of cooling thandai. Then he had to hurry down to Kalba Devi where the specialist in thandai had his stall. And there, since the day was scorchingly hot, he found a long, slow-moving line of customers waiting to be served and had patiently to stand in it till he reached its head. He even had some trouble then persuading the thandaiwalla, crosslegged on a small bench beneath his cupboardlike, bright-pink-painted stall to pour the concoction into the plastic container, though one quick whispered word and the sight of a twenty-rupee note had sufficed to get him a mixture well laced with bhang.

Hurrying back to the hospital, Ghote began to worry that he might

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somehow be too late. Of course Ram Dharkar must still be there. That was one certain thing. The fellow could not move. But might he have somehow changed his mind? Might some thought of how the mysterious Dada could get at him despite all precautions have made him determined after all not to say one more single word?

Or could he, in the past hour, somehow have received a warning from the Dada? But how? No, it was impossible. A vision of a paper dart being flown in through that narrow open window momentarily crossed his mind. But that was ridiculous. Utter fantasy.

The constable on guard at the cabin's door being bribed to let someone in just long enough to deliver a threat? Well, it was possible. But he himself knew the fellow, a man near retirement, two yellow long-service stripes on his sleeve. As trustworthy as anybody in the force.

Nevertheless, entering the noisy, crowded entrance hall of the hospital—OPD CASE NOTES, the letters must stand for Out Patients Department, of course—he could not prevent himself from breaking into a walk not far short of a trot. Luckily he remembered how to get to Cabin No. 773, along one high, white-tiled corridor, his footsteps tapping out, up the wide set of stairs, along again, the white tiles here cracked and sometimes splashed with rust-red betel-juice stains, down the other staircase, past the nursing station, briefcase with its illegal guggling flask inside, a quick nod to the Sister on duty, and there he was, outside Cabin No. 773, the grey-haired long-serving constable squatting beside its door scrambling up to salute him, alert as ever.

"No trouble, Constable?"

"No trouble, Inspector."

And in. And there was Ram Dharkar lying on the bed, looking as if he had hardly moved in the past hour.

Looking, in fact, a good deal worse, Ghote thought, than when he had left him. But an hour more of pain, that would probably account for the clouded eyes, the yet greyer complexion.

The sight and smell of refreshing thandai—it ought still to be noticeably cool—should surely revive him. "Well, man," Ghote said, infusing his voice with enthusiasm, "thandai I have got. A big-big lot, more than you have ever had before I am betting."

He unscrewed the top off the flask and held it just under Ram Dharkar's grey, unmoving face.

And got no response. No response at all.

Ghote swirled the scented pink liquid in the flask and held it near

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the sick man again. "Take, take," he said. "Take one good drink and then be telling me that name."

But Ram Dharkar lay unmoving.

Damn it, had the fellow gone right back to the beginning again? Had he, in that past hour, decided once more that he dared not speak? Not despite every precaution taken to guard him? Not despite Ghote's own promise to have the Dada nabbed within half an hour of learning his name and whereabouts? Not despite this offered illegal bribe?

Now suddenly, without warning, the goonda lying flat on the bed began to vomit.

Ghote was appalled. This was something he had not at all expected. And the fellow, he realized now, looked desperately ill. On the point of death even.

He tore across to the door of the little room, flung it open, saw with relief a nurse trotting down the corridor outside—it was the Sister who had first shown him where the cabin was—and shouted to her that Ram Dharkar was very, very ill.

In a moment she was beside the vomiting goonda's bed making a quick, professional analysis.

"Yes," she said, "he is serious. Very serious. Ring that bell, Inspector. We are going to need much more of help if he is not to expire."

Ghote rang the bell, cursing himself for not having realized it was there before, and then retreated to the farthest corner of the narrow room while two other nurses and, soon, a doctor came onto the scene.

He watched, caught in horrified fascination, while they worked to save the dying man. And thoughts, grim thoughts, ran through his mind.

Ram Dharkar had been poisoned. He was sure of it, if only from what he gathered from the terse questions and answers of the team round the bed. And if the fellow had been poisoned, then it was almost certain who was behind it. The Dada. The mysterious gang boss whose name he himself had counted on learning just a few minutes earlier. Somehow, he thought, word must have got back to this unknown master criminal that a Crime Branch inspector had been closeted with the injured so-called informer for a considerable period. And the man had acted. Had acted with all the speed and decision with which the twenty-five bank dacoities he had planned had been carried out. He had somehow got poison into poor Ram

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Dharkar, and, it looked, in time to shut his mouth forever before he spoke his name.

But how? How on earth had it been managed?

Then, abruptly, Ghote thrust aside the almost useless question. Because through the leaning, busily working bodies of the nurses round the dying man he had caught a glimpse of Ram Dharkar's face. And his eyes, fixed on his own, had seemed to be attempting to tell him something.

Regardless of the urgent medical work round the bed, Ghote advanced carefully toward it. And, yes, as he did so he was certain that Ram Dharkar was responding. If a look alone could do it, he was saying "Come, come, there is something I must tell."

Ghote got himself as close to the head of the bed as he could without actually impeding the nurse there. Ram Dharkar's eyes were plainly now begging Ghote to give him his utmost attention. Now, in all probability knowing himself to be dying, knowing that he had been poisoned—but how? how?—he was at last determined to take revenge and name the Dada.

But the only sound that came from his vomit-flecked mouth was a feeble croak. Ghote turned his head and strove to catch every nuance of the sound. The dying man croaked out a noise again. But this was yet feebler than the time before.

Was he never going to manage to say the one word, two perhaps, that would gain him even in death his revenge? Second by second it looked less and less likely. If ever the marks of death were on a face, for all the desperate efforts of the doctor and nurses, they were on Ram Dharkar's now.

Ghote felt a surge of pure anger. To have been defeated by his mysterious antagonist in this way. At the very last moment.

And how had the man managed it? How had he got someone with poison into the guarded room?

He leaned yet nearer the dying man, willing him and willing him into one last spurt of life, a moment of vigor just long enough to pronounce the name.

But not all his effort to hold Ram Dharkar in this world seemed to be helping. The eyes, clouded only until a few moments ago, now were plainly glazed over.

Then, suddenly, Ghote thought he knew how it had been done. The nurses. The nurses with the wheeled medicines chest. They must have been bribed. Or substitutes must have replaced them and somehow, perhaps merely by the swiftness with which they had

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entered, they had tricked the old constable on guard at the door. And that single little white pill he himself had seen them administer, that must have been the poison. No wonder they had not taken away the Nil by Mouth notice. They had given the would-be betrayer all that was needed by mouth to silence him forever.

His mind raced. Perhaps after all he did not need to hear the name which, it was clear now, Ram Dharkar was never going to be able to pronounce. It was possible, surely, that the two false nurses, or the two bribed nurses, could be traced. Traced, arrested, and interrogated. Interrogated, however toughly was necessary, until they squeaked. And, if not able to name the mastermind Dada directly, be persuaded into giving enough information about who had given them their evil task, wittingly or unwittingly performed, for the trail to lead eventually to that mysterious lurking figure. It needed only one end of the thread to be in police hands and they could be sure, very nearly sure, of getting to the Dada.

He was so excited by his discovery, wondering even whether he should leave the little room and the dying goonda at once and begin inquiries about the nurses with the medicines chest, that he almost failed to notice a change that had come about in the man on the bed.

But he did notice. His attention had been so riveted upon him up to this moment that its residue was enough to alert him.

Plainly Ram Dharkar's last moments had come. A deep agitation was passing through him.

And then, though evidently speech was beyond him, his final convulsion of energy did produce something that until now he had seemed incapable of.

The dying man sat up. And, teetering precariously, he flung out his right arm in a gesture of pointing. The forefinger was rigid as a rod of steel. And he was pointing in a manner that could not be denied at the narrow window of the little room, the window still open at the bottom from when Ghote himself had tried to bring in a little cooler air.

Ghote looked at the window, looked back at Ram Dharkar. And saw in the hope in the man's now momentarily clearer eyes that he himself had begun to read correctly his last message.

There was more of it, too. With a supreme effort, keeping his gaze fixed on Ghote's face, the dying goonda made another gesture. He bunched the fingers of the hand that had pointed so dramatically at the window into a tight knot.

A knot that at once reminded Ghote of something. For a long

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moment his mind battered against the answer like a dull fly battering at a windowpane. And then he had it. A leper. Ram Dharkar's hand was unmistakably imitating the fingerless stump of a leper.

A leper. The leper! The leper he himself had seen, and had discounted, squatting beneath that very window. The leper, or more likely the imitation leper, who must have listened, keen-eared, to every word that had passed between Ram Dharkar and himself. The man who must have heard the promise of a drink of thandai and who, acting with speed and decision—why, yes, yes, he must be, he could only be the Dada himself in disguise—had hurried off, obtained some cool drink that looked enough like proper thandai, and had then swarmed up the drainpipe outside, in the way Ghote himself had envisaged Ram Dharkar, if he had had full use of his legs, swarming down and had then, keeping his face averted, offered the drink. The poisoned drink.

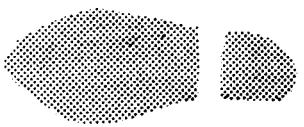
So, yes, at last from the dying man he had learned all that he had wanted to know. Had learned it nil by mouth.

Quietly, Inspector Ghote withdrew from the poisoned goonda's deathbed. Quietly, he made his way over to the still-open window. Carefully, he poked his head out just far enough to catch one glimpse of the dried-coconut head of the supposed leper, crouching there waiting to know whether his daring plan had been successful.

The Dada himself. And, not knowing one thing. That his disguise had been penetrated. That he was now dangerously exposed. That the arms of the law were on the point of being able to enfold him. The Dada. The mastermind.

Quietly as ever Ghote climbed up till his hands were grasping the top of the window and his feet were on its bottom ledge. The gap would be just wide enough, he saw with grim pleasure, to slide his body through.

He launched himself.



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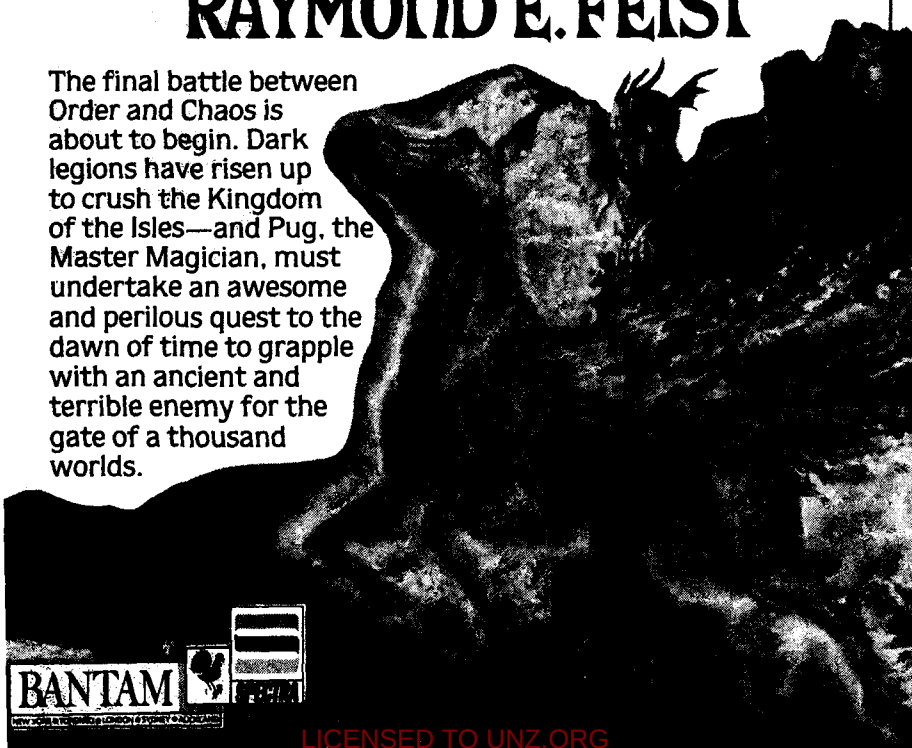

BANTAM

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Billie Sue Mosiman has published two novels—Wireman, *a suspense thriller, and* Bloodland, *a mainstream family novel—and fourteen short stories. This is her first in EQMM and we welcome her with enthusiasm . . .*

THE GROWL

by BILLIE SUE MOSIMAN

Lochman went over his bills a second, then a third time, his sighs growing deeper, his despair settling in like a summer cold. He had his paycheck lying on the desk to his right and its minuscule amount might cover two small debts from the stack of accumulated bills threatening to topple on the left side of his desk. The problem was which could he pay this week and which could he let go until some other week? All the bills were overdue—some of them by weeks, most of them by months.

Lochman put off things like that—paying his debts. He tended to fritter away his pay between Friday evening and Monday morning and nothing was ever left. But about once a month he sat down at the rickety desk with the drawers stuffed full of unopened mail and went through it all, trying to discover a way to appease his creditors. There were overdue bills on electricity and gas and water and rent. These he attended to just often enough to keep the house running and the constable's deputy from serving them an eviction notice. The other bills were for frivolous things like clothes and shoes bought on account at a local shop, tools and household items from the department store, materials from the hardware store to fix the leak in the roof and the broken-down plumbing. Lochman knew he'd never catch up on what he owed. If he slaved overtime at the GM plant for a year, he still wouldn't make a dent in the pile of dun-letters staring him in the face.

He sighed again, chose to pay the gas and to send half the payment due to the department store, wrote the checks, licked the envelopes and the stamps, and sat back, frowning with unease.

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"I'm leaving tonight," his wife said from the doorway to their bedroom.

Lochman swiveled in the chair. "What?" He had heard what she said, but it didn't register.

"I'm taking the kids and going to mother's. They shut off the water this morning."

As if that were enough reason, she turned away, picked up two cardboard suitcases, and strode past him, where he sat immobilized at the littered desk. Bobby and Doris trailed behind, not daring to look at their father.

"I'll have the water turned on again," he said, fearful that she meant it this time. She had never packed their things before.

"I've heard about your good intentions. You want to know what I think about it? Goodbye and adios. Don't bother to call."

The door slammed shut. Lochman leaned his head into his hands. The children hadn't even kissed him before scurrying out the door. She had turned them against him. The whole world was against him.

He stood and went to the front window to draw back the drapes. The Chevy wagon, long in need of a muffler and U-joints, backed out of the driveway into a trash-scattered street. It sounded like a World War II tank hitting rough terrain. He watched it sway back and forth around the garbage left by uncaring neighbors and disappear beneath a far streetlight.

Lochman knew doom was around the corner. It had sneaked up on him from every angle and overtaken him. It wasn't as if he hadn't tried, he told himself. Wasn't he trying? He worked. He just didn't make enough money to support four people. He didn't make enough to support one! But hadn't he tried? He had worked at the car-assembly plant since he was a boy, and when he was first married the money was good. They bought the house. Then they had the kids. Then the raises stopped and his promotions ended and he was trapped, trapped as surely as a fox with its hindquarters in bear claws.

Sudden fury turned him from the window. He passed the desk and with one sweep of his arm knocked the papers and envelopes to the floor. He switched on the kitchen light and rummaged in the top cabinet for whiskey. He poured two fingers in a water glass and held it under the tap. No water. He had forgotten. The pipes were dry as his throat and would remain that way until he came up with fifty-five dollars owed for two months' back usage. He growled, star-

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tling himself, then drank the warm whiskey straight. It took his breath away and made him clench his teeth.

Good. Good that she was gone and he was no longer saddled with the expense of the three of them. Good that the water was turned off and he could drink something else. Good. He didn't care now if he paid the bills or worked his job or made a penny. People lived on the streets. People lived in shacks in the woods outside the city. People lived. So would he.

He woke with a monster headache trying to knock his eyes out of their sockets and the phone jangling like crazy. He grabbed the receiver, licked his lips, kept his eyes shut. "Mr. Lochman?" a voice asked.

"Yeah, whadda you want? Whatever it is I can't pay it." God, he wished they'd disconnected the phone, not the water. He didn't want to hear this.

"That ring you bought your wife, Mr. Lochman. For her birthday, I seem to remember. We haven't had a payment on it in three months."

"I told you, I can't pay it. I'm busted, broke, no deniro, you got that? Squeeze it outa a rock, you'll have better luck."

The voice returned, melodious and controlled. "Mr. Lochman, you owe me. I'll have to send a couple of guys to see you if you're not willing to make good your promise."

Lochman laughed, hurting his head. "You'll do what? Are you kidding me? What is that, a joke? I haven't heard that kind of threat since I used to watch *The Untouchables.*"

"You have two days, Mr. Lochman. If I don't have my money in the mail by then, you'll have visitors."

The line went dead and Lochman rolled onto his stomach, burying the receiver in the pillow. Send guys after him! Talk about melodrama. Talk about hardass. It could make you laugh. If there was such a thing as the Mob, it didn't do business like that in today's world. Utterly ridiculous.

He slipped the whining receiver onto the hook and fell asleep. It was Monday morning and he was missing work. He meant to. He had given up, that's all, and it felt fine. People found ways to live. So would he when the time came. He hadn't yet lost the house and the electricity and phone worked. Sleep was the ticket. He felt as if he hadn't rested for a millenium . . .

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The headache bore him straight into a nightmare replete with sweats and terror, but Lochman didn't wake until dark.

He had forgotten about the phone call. He finished off the whiskey and found a half bottle of red wine. He didn't know the time or the day. When the booze ran out, he sat wide-eyed in the living room watching TV with the sound turned down. The knock on the door made him jump in the easy chair.

"Who?" he asked, opening the door a crack.

Outside in the midnight black stood two hulking shadows. "Our boss said you don't pay on a ring you got from him," one of the shadows said quietly.

"Hey, who are you?"

"We've come to talk to you about your debt, Lochman." The men pushed inside.

Lochman stumbled back and heard a growl. He wondered which of the two men had made that ominous sound—it had scared him more than being pushed around in his own house.

"Listen to that," one of the men said to the other, muscling Lochman backward toward the lighted kitchen. "Big man—thinks he's a wild dog."

A mindless fury moved down from the top of Lochman's head and filled his eyes. All he could see was a world that would not leave him alone no matter how he tried, no matter how quiet he stayed or how still. He was pressed against the sink edge, his arms held behind him. His right hand closed over a carbon carving knife sticking up from a pile of dirty dishes. He closed his fingers around it and power followed in the wake of fury. It propelled him away from the sink and between the two men.

"I don't care about the ring or the bills or your boss!" he screamed.

When his mind cleared, he found himself panting over the bodies sprawled in the harsh overhead light, and from his depths a low growl erupted—but this time he knew it belonged to him.

Disposing of the bodies took time. In the back yard of the crackerbox house on a crackerbox street strewn with debris, a sagging privacy fence shielded Lochman from view of the neighbors on each side. There was a straggly sweetgum tree and tall grass he'd neglected to mow. Lochman dug shallow graves and rolled the two henchmen into them, then carefully replaced the sod. They made two minor humps in the lawn, but with wild grass rampaging from fence line to fence line, the humps were hardly noticeable.

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Lochman thought little about what he had done and of regrets he had none. The world as he saw it had turned on him and he was merely a man fighting for survival.

Within the week, the electricity was turned off, the gas disconnected, the phone went dead, and bills filled the mailbox to overflow. Lochman sat in the twilight reading an official-looking form from his mortgage company that said they were in the process of repossessing his home.

Without the convenience of water, Lochman failed to bathe. Without electricity, the food in the refrigerator and freezer molded and decomposed to lumps of green and yellow. Without the memory of how to get up in the morning to go to work, Lochman simply sat idle each day and waited to be put onto the street as a wanderer. What did he care? What did it matter now? He'd tried and failed, not unlike a million other men crushed by fate. He was too tired to fight it, too cold inside to take notice of his deterioration from a family man to a penniless, unimportant speck of mankind who might just as well kill as be pushed around.

One afternoon when the moon was up early, hiding in the faces of white clouds, a knock came on the front door. Lochman moved lethargically from the easy chair. He stared out, his eyes dim from the long silence he'd observed. "You've come to take the house," he stated tonelessly.

"No, Mr. Lochman, I've come to talk some business with you."

"With me?"

"Please, may I come inside?"

Lochman opened the door a bit and turned his back. "I don't know about any business," he said.

"I sent the men you dispatched so easily, Mr. Lochman. I feel there may be a place for you working for me."

"Men?"

"About the payments on your wife's ring. When they never returned I had someone check you out. They saw you burying bodies in the back yard here."

Lochman slumped in the easy chair, his face turned aside from the visitor. What had he expected, to get away with murder when he couldn't even get away from collection agencies? "So you shouldn't have sent them," he said.

"Mr. Lochman, what would you say if I told you how impossible

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it would have been for a normal fellow to kill two very experienced, very strong men I've had in my employ for ten years?"

"I'd say your judgment was off."

The man laughed and sat on the sofa. He wore a pale-grey suit and beautifully polished black shoes. Lochman thought he might hate him if he had the energy.

"My judgment was off," the visitor repeated, chuckling. "No, they were good enough at their jobs, Mr. Lochman—top of the line in that kind of thing. You understand we don't use those strong-arm tactics often any more, but on some citizens it becomes necessary and no one's the wiser. But you—oh, you have done something quite extraordinary. You didn't beg for a time-extension and you didn't promise prompt payment and you didn't let them frighten you. You killed them. My men. Just like that."

"Get outa here. I just want to be left alone."

"Fifty thousand dollars."

Lochman stiffened. He stared straight ahead of him into the musty shadows of the darkening living room. The house smelled. He could smell it now. Garbage in the kitchen, spoiled food in the refrigerator, dishes in the sink crusted over. What did fifty thousand dollars have to do with this rat hole he sat in? What insane person had walked into his last sanctuary before the street to make sport of him?

"Come to work for me, Mr. Lochman. I'm offering you fifty thousand dollars for each kill you make and don't get caught doing. You'll live splendidly. And I need your skill."

Lochman turned his head to peer at his benefactor. "You mean it?"

The laugh came again, musical and pure as a waterfall in a still forest.

Lochman didn't care if he worked for an organized-crime syndicate or for the President of the United States. Money was money, living was living. They had cleared all his debts, sent in a crew to repair his tumbledown house, deposited an advance in his bank account, and even helped him dial his mother-in-law's number to call his wife home to a new life.

It was a month before they needed his services, and during that month he was the happiest man born. His wife and children showered him with love, thrilled over his new but nameless occupation. The bills came in and Lochman sat at the old desk and wrote out the checks to cover them without a worry. The toilet worked, the

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roof didn't leak, the refrigerator held ten pounds of steak. Life was good.

On the fifth of January, icy winds were blowing off Lake Shore Drive in Chicago where he was to make the hit. Lochman bundled up before he left the car and tightened the scarf around his neck. In his coat pocket he carried a .45 revolver with a silencer attached. He had to earn the fifty grand now and it didn't bother him that he must murder a stranger in an apartment twenty stories above him. It was a living, a splendid one just as promised, and easier than assembling car parts in the GM plant.

He took a service elevator as he had been instructed. He walked down the hallway to number 2021 and rang the doorbell. His hand gripped the gun deep in the coat pocket. Kill the man. Tall, six feet four, dark-haired, skinny, and spectacled. Couldn't miss him.

The door swung open and a woman stood facing Lochman. "Yes?"

"May I see Mr. Hagers, please? I'm one of his clients."

She turned, an unsuspicious woman living a charmed, safe, pretty life where people could be trusted to be who they said they were. "Charles!" she called. "One of your clients!"

She motioned Lochman inside and shut the door. "He'll be right here," she said, leaving him and disappearing into the muted light of another room.

Lochman withdrew the gun, waiting. He could hear a television, a mixer buzzing in the kitchen, children laughing.

Charles Hagers, prominent criminal attorney for underworld figures, came into the entranceway with a puzzled look on his thin, swarthy face. "I don't remember you, Mr.—ah—" Then he saw the weapon in Lochman's hand. "Now wait—"

Lochman did wait. He waited for the growl to slide up his throat from his midsection, for the rage to bubble and encase his brain into a chunk of granite, for the fury to carry him across the threshold of sanity into the grey area where this killing had to be done.

He waited, the gun dangling at his side.

Hagers was talking—rapidly, breathlessly, backing away step by step. His dark face blanched as if he were stricken with a heart attack.

The fury didn't come. Lochman couldn't do it. He couldn't kill anyone. He was too full and warm and clean. His wife had made love to him the night before, his children had kissed him goodbye as he left the suburb outside Chicago that night, his bills were paid, his mortgage was caught up, his mind was at ease.

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"I'm sorry," he heard himself saying. He caught the doorknob and let himself out. He ran down the corridor, stuffing the gun into his coat. He trembled on the way down to ground level in the elevator. He made it home in a cold sweat, his mind falling into jumbled pieces.

He crawled beneath the sheets that night and snuggled against the soft flesh of his wife. He did not sleep until early morning.

The phone woke him. He grabbed the offender and said, "Hello." He smelled coffee, and bacon frying.

"Mr. Lochman, I'm disappointed in you."

The beautifully cultured voice. He had expected it, but he didn't know what he was going to say.

"I'm sorry." It was all he could manage.

"You don't understand, Mr. Lochman. Now that you've scotched your assignment, our problems have doubled."

"I couldn't do it. I'm not a killer. I can't do this for you." Silence that sounded of faraway sea waves hitting shore rebounded in his ear.

"You will be of no use to me then, Mr. Lochman. It is I who am sorry. I thought you a natural. My judgment, it seems, was wrong again."

The click burred in Lochman's ear. He blinked his eyes. He heard his wife calling him to breakfast. He heard his children arguing over a box of cereal to see who would get the prize inside. He heard doom tolling nearby.

By two o'clock, Lochman had cleaned out his checking account, had helped his wife pack, and had sent her, Bobby, and Doris to the airport for an overseas trip. They were ecstatic at their newfound life. They didn't care how it had happened, only that it was wonderful. His wife hugged him close and kissed him long before she left the driveway.

Lochman turned out all the lights and sat before the flickering, silent TV screen with the .45 in his lap. He waited to know what to do. Someone would come after him, he knew that. He'd taken money and given nothing in return. Just as before, he owed a great debt he could never pay. For a few odd moments, he thought about turning the gun on himself, but it wasn't a solution. He didn't want to die. But neither could he be a killer for a fee.

The back door creaked open, and from the corner of his eye he saw

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a man enter the house. Rising from the easy chair, Lochman let the gun hang at his side, embarrassed he had felt he needed it. "I'm in here," he called. "I've been expecting you."

He was shocked to hear the quiet voice of the man who had hired him. "Lochman, I could have sent someone, but I can't trust them with you. I decided to do it myself."

Do it? Lochman thought. Do what? "Now wait a minute, I want to talk this over. I can find some way to pay back the money. I know it's a lot, but—"

The familiar laugh that erupted was full of menacing chill. "Pay me back? On your miserable wages that couldn't even keep up the payments on your wife's ring? Come now, Mr. Lochman, I am anything but a foolish man. No. You will pay all right, but not the way you think."

Lochman's eyes widened as he finally understood he was a dead man. He saw the fine, tapered fingers sliding between the suit coat and vest. "Wait! We need to work this out—I didn't mean for this to happen!"

"We never do," the man said, withdrawing a sleek, chrome-plated weapon. "We never mean it."

For only seconds did Lochman hesitate, his own gun frozen at his side. The room faded into black background as his whole concentration centered on the shiny, deadly muzzle lifting up and toward him. It's not fair! his mind screamed. I tried so hard! Didn't I try? He heard a growl crawl out from dark, primeval depths. It grew louder and more furious until it filled the room, the house, and finally, like thunder lowering over a vast empty plain, it filled Lochman's entire world.

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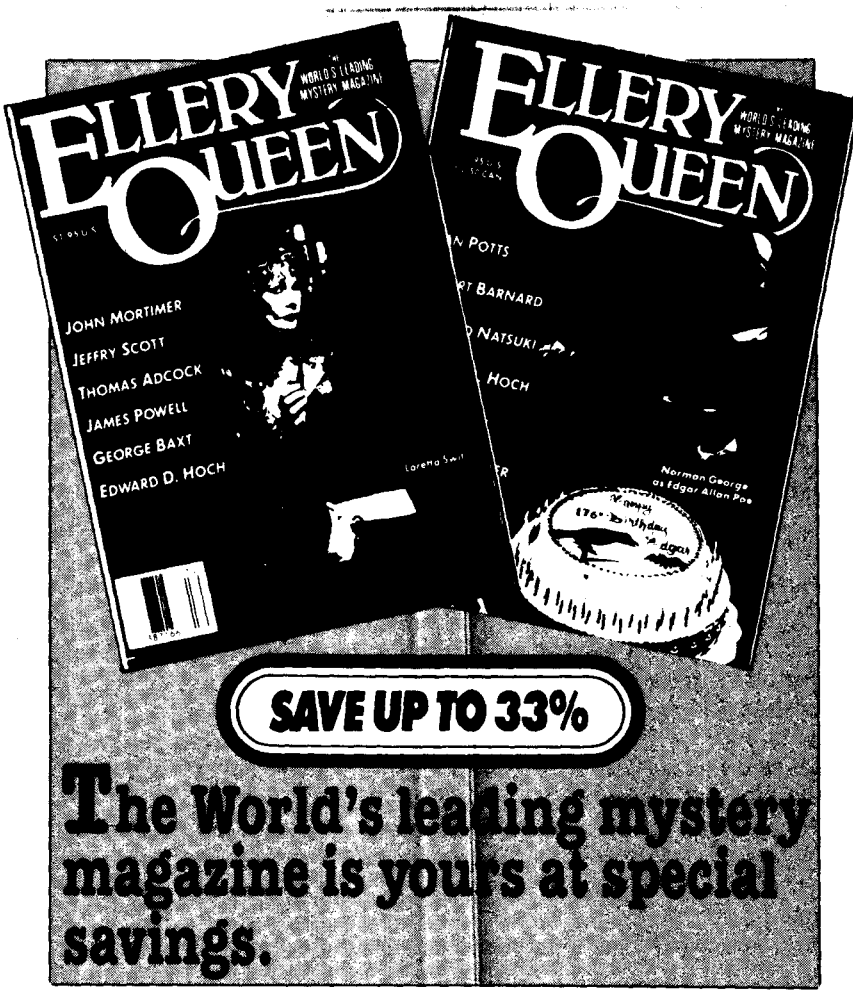

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This is a story about two men fighting over a teddy bear. But then Dr. A. has never claimed that grown men are fully mature. Just playful, human, and curious . . .

THE TEDDY BEAR

by ISAAC ASIMOV

I welcomed the cool dustiness of the high-ceilinged library at the Union Club—it was hot and humid outside—and I had another reason for good humor, for, as I said, "Next week is my wife's birthday and I've remembered to buy a birthday card for her."

"Is that all you got her? A card?" said Baranov.

"That's all," I said cheerfully. "The custom in our family is to buy no presents on any occasion. Just cards. Frankly, even cards are an annoyance and trouble."

"And expense, El Cheapo?" said Baranov with a definite sneer.

"Not at all," I protested. "When I was young, we were bone-poor and couldn't give presents. I just never lived in a present-giving milieu."

"And your wife?" asked Jennings. "Was she a little match-girl?"

"No," I admitted. "Her family never missed a chance to get and give presents, but she hated the whole ritual and was delighted to switch to my system. I wish I could wean her from greeting-cards."

A moan came from the tall winged armchair in which Griswold appeared to be dozing comfortably. He stirred and the glass of Scotch and soda in his hand trembled.

We watched in fascination. Could it be that for the first time in living memory, Griswold would spill liquor?

He recovered, took a healthy sip, wiped his ragged white mous-

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tache with the back of his hand, and said, "Birthdays! You don't know the trouble they can cause! Let me tell you, with your permission—"

"Or without," I said.

Or without [agreed Griswold]. Let me tell you, then, of my friends, Oswald Tracy and David Stern, who lived in the wilds of suburbia in neighboring houses. At college they had been inseparable and had allowed me to be a distant third in their friendship.

Their friendship had started, apparently, when they discovered they shared a birthday. Each had been born on the same day of the same year, and that alone seemed to suffice as an initial bond. When they discovered they were alike in taste and temperament, the bond became one of tempered steel.

They married sisters in a double-wedding ceremony, had a double honeymoon (which rather appalled me), and then settled down in those neighboring houses in the utmost of amity.

I had gradually lost touch with them after graduation—the war and all that—but I met Tracy a few years ago and we had a chance for much middle-aged reminiscing. In the course of an amiable dinner, I became aware that something was missing. He had not mentioned his alter ego.

I said, a little concerned that perhaps death had intervened, "And how is Dave Stern, Ozzie?"

Tracy scowled and said, "All right, as far as I know. But frankly it doesn't matter to me whether he is or isn't."

"Are you serious?" I said, astonished. "That doesn't sound like the old Damon and Pythias routine."

"It isn't. Dave is no gentleman. He doesn't play fair."

"At what? Have you had a dispute over golf? Bridge?"

"No, nothing like that," said Tracy, clearly brooding. "It's a much more serious thing, but I don't know if I can explain it to you. It may sound silly."

"Try me," I said. It was clear to me that he was suffering and was probably aching to talk—and I was right.

I won't try to tell you the story as he told it to me; it would be entirely too emotional and lengthy. I will, instead, put it into my own words as much as possible.

A number of years ago, in the course of an aimless conversation between Tracy and Stern, it turned out that each had had a teddy bear as a child and that each had been closely attached to it. Each

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had abandoned his teddy bear with time and, as each admitted in embarrassment, each had missed it on occasion and remembered it fondly. Somehow it meant a lot to the two men that they had shared this childhood experience.

Their joint birthday came a month later, and Stern, in a moment of sentimental nostalgia, gave Tracy a teddy bear for a birthday present, with a ribbon around its neck saying, "Happy birthday, old friend."

Tracy was moved to tears by this and almost at once he laid his plans.

A year passed, and on their next birthday Stern received an elaborate package, beautifully wrapped, with no indication of the sender. He opened it curiously, and out of it came the same teddy bear with the same ribbon around its neck—now a present from Tracy back to Stern.

Without actually arranging it in any formal way, the two friends began to conduct an annual birthday dance that became an all-absorbing and ever more intricate game. On each birthday, the one who had received the teddy bear the year before had to present it to the other in such a way that the other was surprised into accepting it or, for some reason, had no choice but to accept it.

Naturally, the recipient of the year was aware that an attempt would be made to deliver the teddy bear and he would be ever more wary about any package or container or delivery device, while the donor labored to produce some elaborate way of surprising him and neutralizing his wariness.

As the years passed, the lives of both Tracy and Stern were increasingly twisted by this game. Both spent more and more time each year—and money, too—planning delivery or evasion; both grew more and more serious about it and each year there was a marked escalation of effort.

Finally, on their most recent birthday, it was Tracy's turn to bestow the teddy bear on Stern. In preparation for that, Stern had suddenly left town two days before. That had never been done by either man—evasion by disappearance—but since there were no rules to the game, it wasn't actually illegal. But Tracy said to me, "It was a cowardly move and I should have known then that he wasn't a man of honor."

However, he hadn't been entirely without his suspicions. Stern had made some preparations that made it look as though he were planning a trip and the suspicious Tracy had hired a private detec-

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tive a week before their birthday to arrange for a twenty-four-hour-a-day watch on his friend. In consequence, he learned that Stern was going to a reasonably distant city. He even discovered that Stern had checked into a particular room at one of its less prominent hotels.

Tracy acted at once. He caught a plane and arrived in the same city the next day—the day before their birthday. He had arranged for a paid-in-advance reservation at the same hotel.

I must admit I was astonished. I said, "You actually followed him by plane just to deliver a teddy bear?"

He looked impatient. "Who cares about the teddy bear? It was the *game*. I couldn't let him win, could I? —Oh, hell, you don't understand. No one understands."

"I understand," I said soothingly, though I was convinced both men had grown mad on the subject. "But consider that you both had escalated what was originally fun to such a pitch that you were both placing your very friendship into the hazard. If one of you were to win this one, surely the loser would never forgive the winner."

"Not if the victory was a fair and honest one," said Tracy. "But if the victory was won by *cheating*—"

"Well, well," I said, "Tell me what happened."

"I came into town the eve of the birthday with a business associate of mine—a big, wide, strong fellow who likes practical jokes and whom I had convinced I was planning one. And I was, in a way. I let my friend do the negotiating at the hotel. He managed to squeeze the number of Stern's room out of the desk clerk for a sum of money—he could bid high, it was my money—and he got a room for us higher up in the same line. From the number of the room, I could tell it was just two floors above Dave's—which was perfect.

"Go on." I said.

"The trick was to get the teddy bear into his room. I couldn't simply bang on his door and shout 'Delivery!' or hire a bellhop to do it. On his birthday, Stern would certainly refuse to open his door. Nor would he try to make use of room service on that day, so there would be no chance of delivering the teddy bear under a dishcover. In fact, if I had hired someone to come to his door and shout 'Fire!' I suspect he would rather have taken his chances on being French-fried in his room than have opened the door and risked having a fire-resistant blanket handed him and, after accepting it and unfolding it, finding a teddy bear rolling out with that ribbon wishing him a happy birthday."

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"Unbelievable. But what *was* your plan?"

"I arrived at the hotel well after midnight so that it was now actually our mutual birthday. I entered the lobby carefully, though I didn't think there was much chance he would see me—Stern tends to be an early-to-bed guy. So am I, for that matter, but on this night I intended to stay up all night if I had to. What I was planning to do was to go down the side of the building from my room to his."

I stared at him. "What?"

"Sure! The room was ideal for the purpose. My room and his faced on a narrow courtyard with the blank wall of a storehouse or something on the opposite side. I wouldn't be seen. The windows of my room, and presumably of Dave's, opened easily, and I knew that he tended to sleep with his windows open. All I had to do was to be lowered by rope—"

I said, "You intended to dangle by rope on the sheer side of a building to deliver a teddy bear? How high up was the window?"

"Plenty high, but that didn't matter. I'm not an acrophobe and, besides, I'd have gone into the cage of a hungry tiger to deliver that teddy bear if I had to. But actually there was no risk—we had a length of strong new rope, we were going to tie it securely to the legs of a good heavy bed, and my muscular friend was going to pay it out carefully."

"And if the rope had broken?"

"It wouldn't. I'm a lightweight. Besides, I simply had to take the chance. —The teddy bear was tied around my neck and I had a good grip on the rope. I eased myself over the windowsill and down I went, with my friend holding the rope and looking over the sill."

"And if you had fallen your friend would have been up on a murder charge."

"I didn't fall," said Tracy impatiently. "I passed the window immediately below mine. It was dark, as was the one below that, which was the one I wanted. And it was open. There was a ledge under the window on which I balanced myself while my friend paid out a little extra rope and I pulled the window upward slowly. It made no noise to speak of.

"Anyway, I managed to get into the room. I could hear Dave snoring softly. After my eyes were adapted to the dark, I could see his bed. It was a double bed and he was sleeping on the far half with his back to me. Carefully and noiselessly, I placed the teddy bear on the pillow not six inches behind his head. It was a calculated risk, but it worked. He didn't wake up.

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"I moved back to the window, climbed out, and signaled my friend to heave me back up. The whole thing worked out perfectly, and since the room was already paid for we left at once. I didn't want Dave to know I'd been in the hotel. I wanted him in a state of complete mental chaos, wondering how it was done.

"In fact, I spent the next day in a dream of happiness, thinking of Dave turning in his sleep, bumping into the teddy bear, startling awake, and finding that I'd somehow managed to deliver the birthday present even though he was far from home in a locked room.

"And then Dave returned home, grinning like a foul hyena, and said to me, 'Well, the teddy bear is all yours at last. You've lost.'

"I said, 'What do you mean, Dave? I put that teddy bear right into bed with you and you know it.'

"He had the face to say, 'No, you didn't.' He was lying, of course."

I said, "And does he persist in saying he didn't receive the teddy bear?"

"Yes, he does. I took the trouble to produce a written and notarized statement from my business associate describing exactly how it was done, and Dave had the infernal gall to ask, 'How much did that little piece of paper cost you?' "

"And what did you say to him?"

Tracy said grimly, "Oh, I said plenty, you bet. I told him in full detail that the game depended on the honor of the contestants and that only a low, sneaking worm would be satisfied to win by what both parties knew full well was an outrageous lie. Then we had a kind of fistfight and I'm glad to say I gave him a nosebleed. That's the end of it. Good riddance to the lousy bum. I intend to sell the house, and if my wife doesn't agree to it I'll divorce her, that's all."

I thought about it a moment. "Has Dave ever lied before about the game, or acted dishonorably?"

"What's the difference? He did *now.*"

"Maybe he didn't."

Tracy turned an angry red. "Are you saying *I'm* lying?"

"Perhaps neither of you is lying."

"I say he got the teddy bear. He says he didn't. One of us has to be lying and I know I'm not."

"May I ask you one question, Ozzie?"

"Go ahead."

I asked the question and Tracy didn't have to answer. His mouth fell open and he saw his error at once.

—And that's my birthday story. . .

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Griswold took a sip of his drink with his usual irritating attitude that he need say nothing more.

Jennings said, "We have to know what the question was, you know."

Griswold feigned surprise. "Don't you already know? Is it possible you don't see it for yourselves?"

Baranov said, "Why don't you stop wasting time and tell us?"

I said, "Perhaps he doesn't know the question himself."

Griswold favored me with one of his most elaborate sneers. He said, "As a matter of fact, I simply asked him if his room in that hotel had been on the fourteenth floor—and of course it was. He was in 1469 and Dave was in 1269, so that Dave certainly *seemed* to be two stories below—and would have been were it not for the fact that most hotels cater to ignorant superstition by omitting the thirteenth floor. So when Tracy worked his way two stories downward, he passed Stern's room, one floor below, and delivered the teddy bear to 1169. Tracy delivered it and Stern never received it and both were telling the truth."

Jennings said, "So Tracy lost."

"Yes, but fairly and honestly. And I pointed out how lucky Tracy had been. If the occupant of 1169 had awakened, especially if it had been a woman, Tracy might have found himself in all kinds of trouble. Besides, if the game were to continue at that rate of escalation, one or both would soon be killed at it."

I said, "Are they friendly again?"

"Yes—though with a certain agreement. Neither one can ever again, in each other's company, make reference to—"

"Teddy bears," I said.

"Right," said Griswold.

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a short story by

TAMA JANOWITZ

"Case History #15: Melinda" is from the bestselling collection of her stories by the refreshing and original Tama Janowitz, Slaves of New York. *If you haven't seen this young writer on national TV or read the cover story about her in* New York *magazine, you may have read other of her fiction in such diverse periodicals as* The New Yorker *and/or* Mississippi Review *and/or* Interview . . .

CASE HISTORY #15: MELINDA

by TAMA JANOWITZ

Melinda was tiny and blonde with the luminous dark eyes of a loris or some nocturnal animal. At night she worked in a bar; she had come to New York to be a dancer with an experimental company but had broken her leg in a taxi accident and now hoped to get into choreography or set design.

With the money she collected from the insurance company she was able to buy a small apartment with a back yard near Tompkins Square Park. When she had some extra cash she would go to the ASPCA and buy animals that only had one day to live and take them home with her and try to find them new homes. Almost always she grew attached to the animals and couldn't bring herself to give them away. The animals were a substitute, she thought, for a man and a real relationship, but there were no men interested in her and the animals loved and accepted her in a way that no man ever could.

She lived with eight cats and five dogs: an elderly Schnauzer with no teeth who reminded her of her grandfather; a German shepherd-collie mix that supposedly had been trained as an attack dog but was afraid of everything, including the cats; a pair of schipperkes

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that liked to howl in unison to the stereo; and a dachshund that had to be strapped into a little pair of wheels as he was partially paralyzed from the midsection down. The animals took up all her time and were spoiled and demanding, but this didn't bother her; in fact, Melinda rather liked playing mother.

Once late at night she saw a tiny baby rat crossing the street very slowly. It was missing a leg and Melinda scared the rat into a paper bag and took it home, where she kept it in an aquarium. A short time after she took the rat home her dogs and cats all came down with a bad case of fleas but Melinda loved the little rat and also sometimes found pigeons that were hurt and other wounded and delicate animals. In the yard was a stack of cages in which she kept rabbits and ferrets she had bought from a run-down pet store on Houston Street.

The bar where she worked was a regular neighborhood kind of bar where a lot of male artists hung out watching the ball games on TV or shooting pool and most of them had tried to date Melinda at one time or another. Quite often Melinda would invite them back to her place for a cup of coffee, but when they saw her tiny crowded apartment (which was full of angry barking dogs that were all busy defending Melinda or trying to rape her guest's leg, and yowling cats and the rat in the cage) they never returned to visit her again.

Most of the men she knew didn't mind their own mess but it was quite a different story in a woman. Melinda didn't care, however; in a way, she looked upon the chaos and terrible odor of her apartment as a kind of test. When the right man came along he would be willing to overcome the circumstances in much the same way as the princes in fairy tales were willing to slay the dragon or go off in search of the magic potion in order to win the princess.

One night, in her bar, a pretty, exotic-looking boy came in. He had dyed black hair and was missing one of his front teeth. He looked like a crazed angel. None of the regulars had ever seen him around before.

After he had drunk four beers Melinda suggested he pay his tab as the bar was about to close. The boy broke down and began to cry. He said he was only twenty-three (though he looked younger) and had no money and was out on the street. His name was Chicho, and he hoped to get a job, either working with the elephants at the zoo or studying dolphins in Florida.

Melinda felt sorry for Chicho. She said he could come home with her, and in fact he could stay with her on a temporary basis provided

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that he help clean and care for the animals. Chicho said that would be fine.

After a few days Melinda realized she was falling in love with Chicho. He was so naive, so gentle and innocent, he reminded her of a little injured puppy. Behind his facade of street toughness was a true child who worshiped Melinda and thought everything about her was wonderful.

He was very good with the dogs and took each one out in turn for its exercise so that Melinda would have more time to work on her dance-project ideas. He even cleaned up the yard, which was filled with cat droppings and mud. "It's true I'm educated and you're not," Melinda told him. "And also you're ten years younger than me. I always thought these things would be a problem in a relationship. But now I see the ideal relationship is based on trust and kindness, and the rest is unimportant."

One day they discovered that the stunted rat in the aquarium was missing. Melinda accused Chicho of letting it go or somehow getting rid of it—of all the animals, the rat was the only one he didn't care for—but he assured her the rat must have escaped on its own. No doubt it was running around somewhere in the walls, or had made its way back to the streets.

She didn't really believe him, but she didn't want to pick a fight. She was thirty-three years old and Chicho was the first man who had shown any interest in hanging around. It was true he was good with the dogs, but aside from that he was a lot of work; he still could not find a job and Melinda had to give him spending money, and he expected dinner to be cooked for him whether she had to work that evening or not. But any stray, Melinda knew, was a lot of work at first and it was possible, through years of gentle persuasion, to train even the most abused and wild animal.

A short time later she came down with a mysterious disease. She grew quite ill and no doctor had any idea what was wrong with her. Finally, after extensive tests, she was diagnosed as having Weil's disease. This was an extremely rare ailment which most doctors had not seen or heard of. It was acquired from drinking liquid that a rat had urinated into. It was possible that the deformed rat had been wandering around late one night and urinated into the glass of water Melinda always kept near her side of the bed.

She was taken to the hospital and was there for many weeks, but during that time Chicho only came to visit her once. She forgave him, however; he was like a wild animal who did not understand

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even the most ordinary laws of etiquette. She knew Chicho was probably thinking about her all the time.

It was not expected that she would recover; she could feel herself growing weaker and weaker and she thought how sad it would be after her death when all her stray animals and Chicho had no one to look after them.

To everyone's surprise, however, she got better. She went home in a taxi and when she walked through the door of her apartment she found Chicho in bed with her closest girl friend. All of the animals were gone—he had apparently given them all away or let them loose—and the apartment had been neatly repainted and cleaned up. "Man," Chicho said, not even bothering to wrap a sheet around himself, "what are you doing here?"

She had to get the police to have Chicho evicted; it was expensive to get the locks changed, and difficult to accept the fact that she had been betrayed by one of God's creatures, but eventually she got a new bunch of crippled and stray dogs, forgot Chicho, and settled into her old ways, neither joyful nor despairing.

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a short story by

DAVID FREEMAN

Also from a bestselling collection of an author's short stories, A Hollywood Education: Tales of Movie Dreams and Easy Money, *"Another Bottle of Petrus" records the careless sleaze practiced by too many in today's world. That's the bad news. The good news is that it* is *being recorded, effectively and entertainingly, obviously by writers who do care, and that the success of both story collections from which this story and the previous one are reprinted is further evidence that the short story is alive and well . . .*

ANOTHER BOTTLE OF PETRUS

by DAVID FREEMAN

Barney Harris, a producer I had worked with a few times, asked me to meet with him and Moon Dugan, who at the time was a very big star. This was a few years ago and Moon is dead now, cancer in Mexico. He tried some trendy cure that amounted to coffee enemas and thinking good thoughts and he died in an adobe hospital, his insides rotted from the Camels he smoked for thirty years. When I met him, if he knew he had the disease, he wasn't saying. Barney told me to read a play called *The Outsider.* As it happened, I had seen the play when it was done on Broadway. It was by Edward Lopat, a minimalist playwright who went in and out of favor with the critics. Lopat is dead now, too. He died in an absurd traffic accident in Knightsbridge about a year after Dugan died. He was crossing Sloane Street with his oldest daughter when a motorcycle hit him. He died in St. George's Hospital a few days later, without

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ever regaining consciousness. Death has done wonders for his reputation.

The meeting was at Barney's office in Century City. I had flipped through the play that morning and rather liked it. It was about a man who intrudes on the lives of two women, each of whom may or may not have been his lover. It was mysterious and full of unexpected drama. I assumed Dugan wanted to make a movie of it and wanted me to adapt it. It seemed like a long shot, but if you were a screenwriter, working for Moon Dugan couldn't hurt. I was sitting out in the hall waiting to be called into Barney's office when an overweight man with a reddish beard extended his hand and said, "Hi, I'm Moon Dugan." I drew a blank for a moment—Moon Dugan had a tight, muscular face and a lean, hard body, a movie star's appearance. This guy looked like a Humboldt County dope farmer. After a moment of confusion, my wits returned and I said something like "Of course you are," shook the man's hand, and followed him into Barney's office.

Moon wanted to do the play as a film, all right, but Lopat had already done the screenplay. Moon needed some changes and Barney had suggested me. Moon wanted the man to be an American so he could play the role, and that meant changing the language to a looser, more colloquial American speech. I didn't see why that couldn't be done. After all, the character is an outsider—that's the title of the thing. So long as the two women were still English, the guy would be all the more of an outsider. Moon thought that was dandy—like all movie stars, he liked it when you told him what he already thought, but you framed it better. Did I think the language could be changed?

"Well," I reasoned, "if you're going to make him an American, you can't very well have him sipping tea and eating cucumber sandwiches. You either do it or you don't."

Moon smiled and then Barney told me why I was there, and it wasn't to do the rewrite or the script. "Do you think you could persuade Mr. Lopat to make those changes?" Jesus . . . People write Ph.D. theses about Lopat's use of language. Normally the producer or the star would do this himself. But one look at Moon Dugan's gut and it was pretty clear why he didn't want to go out in public. Barney didn't say why he wasn't going himself, but it was probably because he thought Lopat wouldn't take him seriously.

An important part of all this is that Moon and Barney were ready to pay me ten thousand dollars plus the cost of the trip to undertake

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this mission. As we discussed it, I guess I was a little standoffish, not as a ploy, but because I wasn't sure I could pull it off. They had picked me because I had written plays, one of which had been done in London, and I was a screenwriter. Great. To Moon and Barney that might certify me as an intellectual, but to Lopat I would surely be some sort of rude American joke foisted on him by Hollywood. Moon must have sensed my discomfort and doubt. He began to back off, saying maybe he'd better wait till he was free and could do it himself. Translated, that meant get someone else, or wait till he'd lost enough weight and then bring Lopat to Hollywood. I could feel the whole thing slipping away, so I had to come up with something big, fast. I said,

"Let's make it double or nothing. If I succeed, and bring back the revisions, the price is twenty grand. If I fail, keep your money." You'll never get anywhere in Hollywood if you're not ready to gamble all the time, and Dugan, who was a famous poker player, loved the idea. Barney began to cough and hem and haw, but "double or nothing" were the magic words to Moon Dugan. So we made the deal on a handshake and a grin and I was off to London to see just how seriously Mr. Lopat would take me.

Since it was on Moon Dugan's ticket, I flew to New York, took the Concorde to London, and checked into the Connaught. Lopat was coming in from the country to meet with me. His secretary wanted me to know that was a concession. I thanked her, as if I didn't realize Mr. Lopat was avoiding the alternative, which was to invite me down to his house in the country, where I wouldn't leave till I got what I wanted or he threw me out. So we were both staying at the Connaught and, I suspected, about to run up some serious room-service bills. I had met Lopat once a few years earlier in New York at some junior playwrights' bash. He was in town and he came by to be held in awe by a group of hopeful dramatists. We were all tongue-tied in the presence of the great man. It was a room full of writers acting a lot more sensitive than they felt. Lopat's response to it all was to mumble and talk so quietly that nobody heard anything he said.

I was to meet him in the grill at half past one. I had checked into his background. He was from Manchester, working class. He'd gone to Cambridge, Clare College, where he read history. He was fifty-two, a CBE, and a knighthood was a possibility. His politics were

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Tory and his plays were often very good. He'd been married a few times and God only knew what I was in for.

I read his screenplay of *The Outsider* on the plane. It looked to me as if he'd taken the play and had it retyped with a lot of what somebody took to be cinematic touches. The dialogue and the structure were mostly unchanged from the stage version, but the characters regularly saw their faces reflected in champagne bottles, pools of water, and once, I think, in a mustard pot. The sun seemed to rise or set gloriously in every third scene. Maybe he'd been to film school since I met him. All this was on my mind as I waited at the Connaught bar.

He arrived about twenty minutes late, and he came in bowing, nodding, and begging pardons in the English upper-class manner. I guessed the Manchester childhood was only a bad memory. He was with a woman so beautiful she made my eyes ache. Her name was Vera and she was French. So the author turns up at the Connaught with a French mistress. Mr. Lopat, I realized, was going to play this one full-tilt.

"Hello, hello," he said. "So sorry to be late. I do hope you haven't been waiting long?"

"No, no," I said, matching his double hello with my double no. "Think nothing of it." I could see the subtitles running across my stomach: "Okay, you've shown you've got the power, now let's get on with it." He introduced the glorious Vera and we went to the table. I don't know why I felt such resentment toward this man—of course I know why. I was jealous. He was a celebrated playwright, an author. I was kicking around Hollywood doing rewrites and I had come halfway around the world to talk him into making a hash out of a fine play so Moon Dugan, if he could lose weight, could turn it into a bad movie.

Before we ordered lunch Mr. Lopat studied the *carte des vins* as if it were the Upanishads, discoursing about the virtues of claret as opposed to anything grown in Burgundy, Italy, or, God forbid, California. He let me in on the little secret that Petrus was an excellent wine as he ordered a thirty-two-year-old bottle of the stuff. Maybe that was Vera's age.

The wine steward went off to hunt for the bottle and it was clear that Mr. E. Lopat was some piece of business. The man had English tailoring, European manners, and now he wanted some American money.

After a few glasses of the Petrus, with Vera's smile pinning me

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to my seat, Lopat began to talk about what he took to be the central problem of adapting his play to the screen. "You know, my boy, the process is extremely difficult. I suffered—oh, yes I did. It was as if I were asked to give birth to the same child twice."

Maybe it was the way he guzzled the Petrus, or maybe it was the glare from Vera's Cartier bracelet, but I began to see subtitles on Lopat's stomach, too: "I don't give a damn what Moon Dugan and all the princes of Hollywood think. And you, laddie, you just keep pouring the great wines of France." That was a very good sign and I started to get hopeful. "The screen is so literal," he said. "I try to be, if I may say so, more poetic. I'm not interested in the conventions of naturalism. I prefer suggestion and symbolism. One can hardly photograph the pages of a play. We must seek out the cinematic, the pictorial."

When his little speech was finished, he smiled, absolutely pleased with himself. It made sense, sort of. But it certainly didn't address the specific problems of turning this English play into a Hollywood movie.

"Moon became interested in *The Outsider*," I said, sipping Petrus and ignoring the chops that had arrived—always good to ignore the food at these lunches, it suggests you eat in places like this so often that you hardly notice—"because he feels like an outsider. He doesn't live in Hollywood and he rarely comes to Los Angeles." Subtitle: "He spends all his time in Aspen because there's more cocaine there than anyplace but Bogotá." "Moon has an actor's sense of your play, an intuitive feel for it." Subtitle: "Moon Dugan never even read the thing. It was explained to him and he said yes because he thinks you're a highbrow and that's what he wants the world to think he is." "His fear, and I think you'll agree it's a legitimate one, is that his audience won't accept him as an Englishman."

"Umm," Lopat said, stroking Vera's arm. "The bottle seems empty."

I signaled for more Petrus, wondering if even the Connaught Grill had more than one bottle on hand. Lopat's contract called for a large bonus if his script was used and he got screen credit. So for a man who drinks Petrus and has a friend like Vera, a big production bonus is going to be very important.

"Moon hopes that you can stay involved, but if you say it can't be done, Moon's willing to drop the project right here. No hard feelings." Subtitle: "We both know who the real power is in this. Do what he wants or forget the money."

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"I want to help make it a success," he said, a tiny trace of fear on his face. "I suppose the screen does require language that is less rhetorical—more accessible—colloquial. Some of the long speeches might be more effective if a bit were pared away. One must find visual equivalents. It's all so wretchedly real on the screen, so literal, what with all the streets and the trees and the teacups. It doesn't permit irony, does it?"

"That's a wonderful analysis of the problems. I'll quote you. I hope I do it justice." Subtitle: "Sounds like a graduate student gone berserk. The man's worried. If I just talk art and think money, I can win." "I think one way to proceed would be for me to sketch in the changes, using American idioms and my own sense of Moon's voice. I wouldn't presume to write your script, but it would give you something to react to." Subtitle: "I'll do it and you can pretend to change it and we can be done with this charade."

"Well, I've never collaborated before. I—I—I—" He's hauling out the Cambridge stutter. I guessed that meant I'd got him.

"I wouldn't presume to be your collaborator. I'm going to propose a few specific changes. You will, of course, be free to accept, reject, or alter them. Perhaps we could meet again tomorrow to review the changes?"

"Fine, fine. Shall we have a bit more wine?"

I signaled for another bottle of Petrus and Vera laughed, a little tinkling laugh of a sort heard only around bottles of the best Bordeaux.

I spent the rest of the day and much of that night rewriting the script. It was mostly a matter of changing the "I says" to "okays," and giving the man some "How do I get to the train station?" lines. In Hollywood, often enough the work isn't hard; it's getting the job that's the problem. I resolved to claim that all the changes I was proposing had Moon's approval. If Lopat hesitated, I would say that I was Moon's plenipotentiary in this matter and if the changes were not made to my satisfaction, Mr. Lopat could forget about the movie ever being made.

The funny part of it was, the more I thought about Lopat and his pretensions, the less I liked him; yet each time I read his script I had more respect for him—not as a screenwriter, God knows, but as a dramatist. With only a few words and without appearing to try, the man could make shimmering characters. But the world rewards

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playwrights with prizes and laurels; it rewards screenwriters with truly interesting sums of money.

Lopat was to come to my room in the morning. If I prevailed, we would work until I had a script I could take back to Los Angeles. He came rolling in about noon, looking as if he and Vera hadn't been doing much sleeping. He asked for a drink and I poured him some coffee.

"Well, from the look of this room, I daresay you've been hard at it. Hmmm?"

"I've roughed in some of what Moon would like." I handed him the script with my penciled alterations.

He stared at them, pretending to read, nodding, and mumbling under his breath.

"Well, yes then. You seem to have done it, haven't you?" The irritation in his voice was unmistakable.

"Not at all," I said quickly. "This is meant as an indication of the direction. Your hand is yet to be felt here. I certainly—"

"Now, listen here, you're a clever-enough fellow. You can't expect me to race through this. You'll recall what Valéry said: 'Art is never completed, it is abandoned.' Well, I'm not quite ready to abandon this particular bit of art. I would like something to drink that doesn't come in a cup."

I was calling room service for a pitcher of Bloody Marys when it dawned on me that what Lopat wanted was to stay in London with Vera for a while, living it up courtesy of Moon Dugan. "Let me suggest something," I said to him as sincerely as I could. "Suppose you take the pages to your rooms and think about it for, say, a week. Then, based on your thoughts, we can either change it a bit or deliver it as it now stands."

"Interesting idea," he said, flipping through the pages again. "This is a deceptive task. It looks simple enough, but it's quite easy to mar the rhythms if one isn't careful. It may take some doing."

"How long do you think the doing will take?" I asked as I went to the door to receive the drinks. The bellman poured while Lopat studied the pages.

"I think I could complete the work in, say, two weeks?"

"I'm sure I can persuade Moon of the value of taking your time. Is it possible for you to stay in London while you work?"

"Umm," he said, a trace of a smile appearing. "I suppose I could arrange that. The Connaught is satisfactory. You'll continue on here as well?" I nodded yes and Lopat finished his drink and mine. We

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agreed that I would send a photocopy to his quarters so he could begin work.

I called Hollywood later that day and told Barney we were working hard and that I estimated Lopat would need about two weeks and that if the two of us just stayed at the hotel, which Lopat was willing to do, I could bring a finished script back with me. Except for Lopat's agent, who demanded additional payment for his client's incidental expenses, there were no objections.

After that I saw Lopat twice in the bar and once in the barber shop. He was always courteous; Vera was always on his arm. He never mentioned the script, and two weeks to the day later, he checked out and I took the manuscript I had revised the first night back to Hollywood to collect my twenty thousand. Barney was satisfied, but Moon Dugan, who by then must have had the first intimations of the disease that would kill him, never looked at it.

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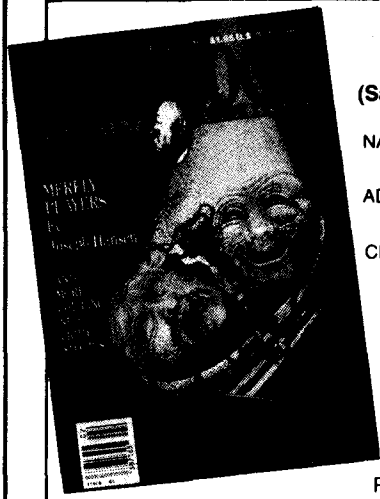

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a *NEW* short story by

NELL LAMBURN

"What shall I do, Merrick?" She'd turn to him beseechingly, as she turned to him for everything. "What shall I do?"

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Another woeful tale from Nell Lamburn, not the least of whose talent is her ability to reproduce the haunting native Wiltshire accent. It's a rare writer who can make dialect enjoyable to read and she is one of them.

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TAKING CARE OF MISS MOLLIE

by NELL LAMBURN

Each morning, hunched in the shelter of the beechhanger, Merrick watched the pipeline swathe nearer across the vale. Watched first the white chalk scraped raw by the steel teeth of the yellow JCB, then the narrow trench gouged just deep and wide enough to take the licorice-black pipes that swung, momentarily free, before disappearing beneath the shoveled chalk and graded earth.

Sometimes Miss Mollie would watch with him, her round soft face puckered with anxiety beneath the shapeless tweed hat, and he

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would hear himself echo the very assurances with which the man from the Water Board had attempted to soothe him:

"Doan 'e worry, Miss Mollie. Come a year you'll not know they've bin here. You'll forgot all 'bout 'em."

"Do you think so, Merrick? Do you really think so?" Her light voice fluttered at him so anxiously that he'd nod with a conviction he could not feel.

"I'm sure of't, Miss Mollie. Convinced."

But he wasn't. Despite the man from the Water Board, despite his own common sense, he knew better. Knew that once the pipeline crossed Lower Acre Meadow, nothing was going to be the same. Ever again.

He'd ball his fists deeper into the pockets of his heavy blue jacket, the ground tomb-chill even through the high thick sole of his surgical boot, the thin winter wind stirring the branches uneasily above them.

The General used to call them his regiment.

"Fernley's Troop—the beechhangers, don't you know." It was his little, bitter joke. "And why not?" He'd stare about him angrily, challenging contradiction. "They're about as damn mobile as I am!"

And every Sunday, after luncheon, he would review them.

Merrick would bring the Bath chair to the front door and the General, supported by his wife and daughter, would struggle down the uneven steps to its wickerbound haven. He could have used the more convenient back door but that wasn't the General's way and Merrick would watch impotently as Miss Mollie heaved her father's solid weight across the glutinous gravel to the comparative evenness of the back drive.

Once, only once, had he attempted to help. Miss Mollie's anguished, speechless gratitude had gone a little way to ameliorate the vicious thrust of her father's sneered rebuke.

"Cripple! You're almost as much a cripple as I am, Merrick!" And the ugly black burden of Merrick's surgical boot had weighted him to the ground in humiliation.

The beech trees had been planted soon after the house was built to break the winds that creamed down from the north. But there's always been trees there, Merrick knew that: alder and hawthorn, oak and lime. Long, long before those beeches with their smooth grey trunks and their rich green heads came creeping in from the Continent. Just as he knew there'd been men living here at The

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Manor a thousand, two thousand, maybe even three thousand years before this house was built.

As a boy he'd limped up often from the Lodge, a refuge from childish taunts—"Peggy!" they'd scream, "Peggy, Peggy, Peggy Merrick!"—to brood out across the wide flat Wiltshire vale, the earth as bitter brown in his nostrils as the words to his ears.

In summer the great headsails of leaves patterned the ground in burnt umber and sepia, while in autumn the beechmast lay like substantive evocations of those very patterns. Fungi lipped the trunks in glistening white and old Mrs. Barlow would sidle through to pluck the ceps Pa relished for his tea.

The General saw none of that. The General's angry, pain-pale eye would scour each trunk for sign of arboreal weakness, inspect their shallow, spreading roots for loosening in the thin topsoil, and weep for any fallen tree. Weep and lay his hand on the supine trunk as he might on the shoulder of a fallen soldier—his soldier—and then, forcing his body upright, would salute his farewell.

But it was Merrick who must bury them. Chop and saw and stack, and then fill the great baskets by the fireplaces while the General brooded, poker like a drawn sword, behind him. Until, limping home, Merrick could sometimes swear it was not wood smoke but the sweet acridity of burning flesh he smelled on the stilly winter air.

But the branches he kept for bonfire nights. It was the greatest bonfire in all the vale, and through September and October the village would bring their offerings to lay on Vulcan's cold altar until, on Guy Fawkes night, the blaze would be so huge they said you could see it twenty miles away.

There were baked potatoes and sausages and barrels of beer and cider and sweet, sticky drinks to clog the palate. In the thrusting firelight, Miss Mollie would clap her hands and dart, with little steps, to see the villagers had all they wanted, and Merrick would be content to see the burden of her father's perpetual anger lifted from her face.

All the parish came. Just as they came for the Summer Fête and the Cricket Match. But not any more. The General was long dead, his wife grateful to follow, and though every year, on Miss Mollie's instructions, Merrick cut and rolled the paddock and prepared the crease, no one came. Ingratiating newcomers had donated a fine new pavilion, sown and rolled Rob's Ground to make a sports field, and Miss Mollie's bewildered disappointment would be transmuted into

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Merrick's fury as, each year, they stared together at the white marquees flaunting in the village below.

"The letter! I must have forgotten to answer the letter!" She'd clasp and unclasp her plump hands in vague agitation. "How *stupid* of me, Merrick! My father never forgot, you know—they must think me so rude!" Her blue, anxious eyes would fill with tears of self-reproach. "What shall I do, Merrick?" She'd turn to him beseechingly, as she turned to him for everything. "What shall I *do*?"

"I do see Mr. Jackson, Miss Mollie. Now doan thee worry." His soft Wiltshire voice soothed her as in another time it would have soothed a beast. "Now thee cum on hoam and I'll make thee a nice cup o' tea."

Relief would grapple with the paralyzing bewilderment until she'd sigh, "Oh, Merrick, *would* you? I'm so *bad* at dealing with people." She'd smile at him then, not intimately, but graciously, as befitted their stations in life. "I don't know what I'd do without you, Merrick, I really don't."

And he'd squirrel the smile and the words away to pick over, with all the others, in the uneventful darkness of his matrimonial bed.

But it was true. At six o'clock each morning, summer and winter, he'd begin the half-mile walk from the Lodge, up between the rented parkland, the spidery vulnerability of the old metal railings supplemented now by the thin orange violence of the Bellamys' electric fencing. His eyes, beneath their heavy lids, noted a fallen tree, a hanging branch, in the inventory of his mind. He never had need of another look. He'd not forget. He'd never been one for writing.

By seven o'clock, the grates were clean and laid, fuel for the ancient Rayburn stacked for the day, and Miss Mollie's tray ready to take up. The routine was constant. His heavy, uneven tread on the shallow stairs, the two loud coughs as he set the tray on the low table outside her door followed by three sharp raps on the panels.

"Oh, Merrick, is that you?" The set litany of their exchange.

"Yes, Miss Mollie. I've yourn tea."

"Oh, thank you, Merrick, thank you. Is it a nice day?"

""Twill be, Miss Mollie, 'twill be." Pause.

"And what color is my egg today, Merrick?"

"You mun guess, Miss Mollie."

Another pause. "Brown, Merrick. Brown today!"

"You're right again, Miss Mollie. Reckon thee peeked."

Laughter, uncomplicated as a child's, reflected in Merrick's contented smile as he went down to prepare the breakfast: to clean and

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cook and serve her meals and drive the Ford to Malmsbury once a week to shop: to dig and plant and mow until, doors locked fast at nine o'clock, he'd limp back to his wife's sullen silence. There'd been gossip at first, of course there had, but it had withered for lack of sustenance, leaving only the white bones of his fidelity.

After the General died, the cousins had tried to send her away, but they hadn't succeeded. Dr. May had seen to that. Dr. May and Mr. Grainger from the solicitors, who came once a month with his brown briefcase of papers.

"You take care of her, Merrick," they'd nod, their hands on his shoulder. "You take care of her and she'll be fine."

And that's just what he was doing. Taking care of Miss Mollie of The Manor, defending the privacy of their enclosed world, safeguarding the remainder of their lives. It was all he wanted. All he'd ever wanted since the night of the VE dance.

Oh, it had been different here at The Manor then. With the General in France, the authorities had requisitioned the house as a convalescent home for the Forces. There'd been so much laughter: pain too, but hope and an innocent merriment because they'd survived and there'd be a Bright New Life for them all. Miss Mollie and her mother had been symbols of that future: innocent, beckoning, their foolishness effervescent after the grey pain of war. Champagne after bitter aloes.

All the village, all that was left of it, came to that dance, and all the patients who could use two legs, they stamped and whirled to the music, and those that couldn't clapped and sang and thumped their crutches on the parquet flooring.

Merrick, tucked in an agony of diffidence behind the library door, watched and marveled until suddenly Miss Mollie had run and pulled him out and it hadn't mattered about his boot at all. He'd stamped and whirled and Miss Mollie had laughed, her blue eyes, white-ringed, shining at him, her little teeth as lustrous as the pearls about her slender neck, her thick fair hair wisping her hot pink face.

"*Dear* Merrick!" she'd cried, her waist slender and pliant beneath his boy's anxious hand. "Isn't it all wonderful? Isn't it *exciting?* I never want it to end!"

But end it did. The patients left, the General—crippled not by enemy fire but in the aftermath of a too excellent mess night—returned, and though Miss Mollie struggled like a captive

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butterfly, she was caught in the killing jar of obedience, stunned by the ether of her father's bitter anger.

As Merrick was caught, after that long dance, by a devotion that would end only in his death. Contented captive.

He'd married, of course, because that was the way things must be, and presumed, because the boy and girl lived there, too, that they were his. But it was hard to tell when he saw them so rarely. It was Miss Mollie who remembered their birthdays. During the preceding week she would instruct Merrick to drive her to Malmsbury and, almost as if they were her own children, there would be a great choosing of presents and wrapping-paper and cards—and, on the day, a ceremonial visit to the Lodge.

Merrick was ashamed, then, of their heavy faces and wary eyes and took no part in the ritual of tea in the kept-for-best flowered cups. A vague resentment stirred in him as he watched, because it seemed to him that his wife was consciously playing a part, actually mocking her guileless, unsuspecting visitor by her display of servility. The little bobbing curtsey, the children either side of her as Miss Mollie left, it was all so contrived, so greetings-card. One terrible year he thought he heard her screeching laughter as they drove away, but she'd not admit it. Only stared at him that evening with her blank, secret eyes until he'd had to limp quickly out before he struck her.

It was the day after the JCB reached Long Acre Meadow that they uncovered the wall of the Roman villa. Mr. Grainger came to explain. About its importance, the urgency to excavate and to ask permission for an archaeologist to carry out a quick rescue dig before the pipes reached the meadow, too. Only Merrick knew, by the promptness of the yellow van's arrival, that it had been merely a polite formality.

From the gravel in front of the house, he watched it bump up the pitted drive behind the green car and his lips twitched in impotent hostility. He didn't want anyone else here at The Manor. This was his world. His and Miss Mollie's. No one else belonged here, no one stayed here except him and Miss Mollie. It wasn't right. Not right at all. Mr. Grainger should have known that.

But Roger Hoyt, irritably winding down the window of the car, wasn't to know. For a second his breath clouded in the bitter air, obscuring his narrow, whisker-framed face, and he said, with an unthinking sharpness born of cold and festering frustration that he must, for lack of funds, conduct this dig alone:

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"You Merrick? Where shall I park this? Where's the bloody villa, then?"

The unnecessary expletive rotted on the air and Merrick's nostrils flared in distaste. Slowly, as if the weight of his resentment was too heavy to bear, he raised his arm to point toward the hulk of the JCB and Roger Hoyt plucked at the rough hair on his cheeks in impatient exasperation.

"Open the gate then, there's a good lad. The ground's hard enough to get this lot across, don't you reckon?"

But Merrick didn't reply. He turned slowly and crossed the gravel toward the five-barred gate, but instead of stopping he limped straight past it, round toward the back of the house. Roger Hoyt swore silently in disbelief. That's just what he needed to make his cup of unhappiness overflow—a cantankerous, bloody-minded yokel and a JCB breathing down his neck. He thought longingly of his warm flat, the notes he was writing up on last year's dig, and, *thrusting open the car door, cursed the man who had sent him.*

Merrick's continuing resentment was in ratio to Miss Mollie's excitement.

"Isn't it *thrilling*, Merrick? Isn't it *exciting?*" Her eyes shone in her soft, ageless face. "To think—a Roman villa—here at The Manor—all the people coming—it's just like old times! That man, he's so charming—he's called Roger, you know—that was my father's name, Merrick—he explains everything to me—he's so *kind!*"

But he wasn't.

"For Christ's sake, keep the old trout away! She chatters more than a bloody parrot. Do me a favor, Merrick old lad, just keep her away." Roger Hoyt's jersey enfolded his narrow form like the sloughing skin of an Aran snake, his red woolly cap hugged his wiry hair, and his sandy eyes beneath the stiff sprouting brows flickered impatiently.

"Tis her land," Merrick said slowly, and resentment of the man distilled into a pure hatred that leaked like acid through his whole body.

"Maybe, but I'm on borrowed time, old lad. The Water Board wants to get on, you see—I've only got another few days at the outside. Time's money to them, not like for you country folk." His smile patronized, and Merrick's heavy lids slid down over his eyes, pausing, as if when he opened them the man might have disappeared.

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"She'll not do nobody no harm," he said, his stubbornness like flint through the rough surface of his voice. "'Tis her land."

"I know—I know that." Roger Hoyt's smile fossilized now into a grimace of impatience. "But I'll never get done if she natters at me all day. She's practically fallen in the trench half a dozen times already. Be a good chap, please keep her away. She'll drive me barmy—I'll be as mad as she is!"

The crude unexpectedness of the statement slit violently the sheath of Merrick's protection, exposing the quivering flesh of knowledge beneath. Pain hissed through his teeth, scorching his throat so that he could not answer. He turned away, blinded by his hatred, and Roger Hoyt, exasperated, watched him go. Then he shrugged. "Stupid old fool." He flexed his shoulders. "He's as loopy as she is."

No one heard the tree fall. It was as if wind and frost had slowly strangled the life from its probing roots until, weary of the struggle to survive, yet not wishing to intrude, it had sunk discreetly to the ground beneath cover of darkness.

Miss Mollie wept, grieving, patting the bark with mittened hands, and Merrick said gently, watching, a little apart:

"'N had a good life, Miss Mollie. His time'd come. Must come to us all."

"I know, Merrick, I know you're right. But he seemed so strong, so full of life." Her mouth, rayed with the little lines of age, trembled and Merrick said, still gentle:

"Us'n not know when us'n to die, Miss Mollie. The strong be struck down along with the weak. Our time's writ but us'n not know when."

Agitation widened her eyes.

"Oh, but you'll know, won't you, Merrick? You wouldn't leave me, would you?" Her trust was complete and he couldn't fail her.

"Course not, Miss Mollie, course not. I'll be here, so long as thee needs I."

Her face cleared, leaving it smooth and placid again, as a lake clears after a squall, and Merrick knew the tree was already fading.

Until the next afternoon, as he set up the ladder to secure the wisteria, he saw her hurrying, ungainly, toward him across Long Acre in little darts and stumbles as her feet stubbed the uneven ground, her short stocky form angled forward in her eagerness to reach the house.

"Oh, Merrick!" she cried, "isn't it *exciting?*" Her eyes shone and

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for a moment she was, for him, the girl of the night of the dance. "Roger has found something special—something terribly *terribly* important—he's going to show me now—" In her haste, her hat had slipped on her wisping grey hair, giving her a rakish, mutton-dressed-as-lamb look. "No, Merrick, *you* mustn't come. Roger says so. It's just for *me!* A lovely surprise! You may see later, *if* Roger says so."

Her importance puffed her up, blanketing him out, and the sour juices of jealousy cauterized him. Jealousy and a sudden, disproportionate unease.

"I mun come," he said stubbornly. "Thee casn't go alone."

"Why not?" The sharpness of her tone wounded him so terribly that he ducked his head. "I'm not a *child,* Merrick. I don't need you to come *every*where with me."

I don't need you. It was all he heard, it filled his skull to bursting, crescendoing, richocheting, terrorizing his reason until sanity cowered, jibbering. It blurred his vision so that Miss Mollie's excited face shimmered in the refraction of his shock, and when clarity returned she was marching toward the back drive with the little bouyant strides she used when about some important mission.

Betrayed, Merrick watched her go, watched Roger Hoyt cross the field from the almost finished dig, and turned away. His heartbeats shook his whole body. His hands stretched and clenched, stretched and clenched. He trembled, his boot dragging in the gravel as slowly he returned to the ladder. He had been right. The coming of the pipeline had brought change, terrible change, to The Manor. And for the first time since the night he'd danced with Miss Mollie, uncertainty, appalling and terrifying in its intensity, pervaded his future.

The first scream caught Merrick with such violence that he was stunned into immobility. At the second, the secateurs fell to the gravel and he swung to catch the full force of the awful merging cresendo. He ran then, his boot panic-light, and Roger Hoyt came stumbling toward him, his voice high in agitation:

"It was a joke—it was only a joke! For Christ's sake, get her out!"

In the shallow pit formed from where the tree's roots had been torn, Miss Mollie stood, the screams jetting from her slackened mouth, her balled fists making shock-hard stumps of her crook'd arms.

Merrick, heaving for breath, followed her gaze.

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Level with her screwed-up, staring face, embedded in the vertical tree base, was a skull. Stained, the caverns of its eyes and mouth choked with earth, its ears blocked by the thin root that trapped it there, it leered at her in grotesque detachment.

"It's only a Roman burial—it's only a bloody Roman!" Roger Hoyt's voice slid even higher, justifying. "How was I to know she'd have hysterics? It was only a joke!"

But Merrick knew better. In that shocked moment, as he stood mesmerized on the edge of the pit, he knew better. Because the skull hadn't been showing yesterday. He'd have seen it. He'd not miss a thing like that. Roger Hoyt must have found it while poking expertly about and exposed the part not still trapped beneath the tree deliberately, to frighten Miss Mollie away from his dig. That's why he had insisted she come alone. He'd deliberately and calculatedly enticed her here, and Merrick's fury, rising from the pain of his abused foot, suffused him with a terrible savagery, unfocusing his eyes so that Roger Hoyt's figure shimmered like a mirage.

He grunted, a quick ugly sound, and turned to clamber into the pit. "Tis Merrick, Miss Mollie." His voice was soft as moleskin and he laid his hand on the rigid arm, stroking the rough cloth of her jacket as he might the coat of a terrified beast. "Tis all right, Miss Mollie, there be nothing to be 'fraid on any more. Merrick's here. Merrick'll take care of thee."

But it was long minutes before his soft insistence could penetrate the barricade of her screams, before her limbs would relax enough to enable him to help her from the pit and support her home—his arm about her waist as it had been when they danced all those years ago.

Dr. May came at once, anxious by the bed until the screams became faint incoherent murmurings in the blessed oblivion of the sedative.

"She ought to sleep till morning. Just don't wake her too early." At the front door he twisted his old maroon scarf about his neck, his voice sharp with a reflection of Merrick's anger. "With luck she won't remember what happened, but if she does, then you must watch her. A shock like that can do dreadful damage to even the strongest mind. I'll send Mrs. Ellis up to be with her tonight. She mustn't be alone in the house." He sighed and put his arm across Merrick's shoulders in trust. "But it's you she needs, Merrick, so don't go far."

It was as if the doctor had spread out his hands in a blessing.

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He said flatly, "I'll not leave her, Doctor. If ought's wrong, I'll phone thee."

"Good man. I'll call again after surgery. And Merrick—" he turned at the door "—get rid of that tree as soon as you possibly can."

All through that grey afternoon, Merrick brooded by the landing window. The velvet curtains, limp with age and faded now in candy stripes of garnet and pink, framed the monochrome of field and sky and gap-toothed hanger.

Rooks, specks of jet lazed home against the steely sky, and at the base of the fallen tree the scarlet firefly of Roger Hoyt's woolly cap bobbed and jerked as he moved about the pit, before he, too, hurried back toward the yellow caravan.

Only Merrick's hands, lying flat along his thighs, contracted in increasing frequency with the spasms of his anger as he labored to bring forth his plan.

Mrs. Ellis came at five, and at ten past Merrick fetched the chain saw and heavy-duty torch from the garden room and set off toward the beechhanger. The pit was empty now except for the skull and Merrick propped the torch so that its strong beam lay a warm yellow tunnel alongside the silvery trunk of the fallen tree.

In the old days he'd used a push-stroke saw, each rasp of its teeth vibrating up his arms so that he could tell just how far he'd reached by the pressure of the wood, even in the dusk. But the chain saw was different. The chain saw slipped like a blade through warm butter, almost before you knew it, needing only its own weight to guide it through. You had to be extra careful with a chain saw.

Get rid of that tree.

That's what Doctor had said. And that's what he was doing. Before Miss Mollie came up and saw that pit again.

The smaller branches he sawed at their base, but the larger ones needed several segments, and he moved like a dancer in some ancient elaborate pavan, his protective goggles a mask, bowing and swaying as he stepped amongst the intricacy of the crumpled branches in the cold dark light until only the shorn, lopped trunk was left. That he'd finish in the morning. That, after all, needed careful watching.

The men heard him in the village as they sat down to their tea—the Vicar, locking up the church, heard him, too, and Dr. May, reluctantly pressing the bell for surgery, heard him and thought tiredly: Good man. He's doing what I said.

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Only Miss Mollie, deep in her drugged sleep, was unaware. Miss Mollie and Roger Hoyt, who was, gratefully, lecturing the Malmsbury Round Table on the excavations at Maiden Castle.

It was nine o'clock when Merrick carried the tray upstairs next morning. He was stiff from the sofa, for he'd not sleep anywhere else, and his wrists ached from the chain saw. He set down the tray and knocked three times, his breath held captive by the constriction of his throat.

Just for a brief, agonizing moment there was silence, except for the great clock tocking in the hall below. Then:

"Oh, Merrick, is that you?"

The set litany was unchanged and his breath grunted out in relief.

"Yes, Miss Mollie. I've yourn tea."

"Oh, thank you, Merrick, thank you. Is it a nice day?"

"'Twill be, Miss Mollie, 'twill be."

The litany broke then, but Merrick didn't move. It was as if he had been expecting it.

"Merrick?"

"Yes, Miss Mollie?"

"Merrick, I had a nasty dream. A nasty, nasty dream." Her eyes, he knew, would be clouded with bewilderment and her chin trembling a little as it did when she was uncertain, as her voice pleaded for his reassurance: "I dreamed a tree had fallen in the beechhanger and there was a skull and a man laughing at me—it was horrid. Horrid, horrid, *horrid!*"

Merrick's lids slid down over his eyes and up again.

"Too much cheese, Miss Mollie. Too much cheese for supper. I dun tell thee so."

"Then—then all the trees are standing?"

"All of 'em, Miss Mollie. Just thee look."

He heard her scramble to the window and draw back the curtains.

"Why, you're right, Merrick! It *was* a dream!"

"Course 'twas, Miss Mollie. Doan thee worry. There be nothing to worry about, Merrick's here. Nothing's changed, Merrick'll take care of things."

He stared from the landing window, across the meadow to the beechhanger.

Where the gap tooth had been, the shorn trunk of the beheaded tree thrust upward and the branches of the others seemed, in the wind, to be reaching out to cover up its nakedness.

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Miss Mollie sighed, comforted. "Dear Merrick, what would I do without you?"

And Merrick, content again, smiled and murmured, "Please God, thee'll not have to, Miss Mollie."

For just a touch would have tipped it. Just a nudge or the slightest meddling with the root base. It had been balanced so fine. He'd seen it before. Been nearly caught himself, in fact. Easy done. Easy accident to happen.

And it would, after all, be company for the Roman.

CRIMINALIMERICK

BROTHER, CAN YOU SPARE A BROTHER?

by D. R. BENSEN

When Cain, in a fit of vexation,
Slew Abel, divine condemnation
Was swift and gave pain;
If he tried it now, Cain
Would likely get three years' probation.

Genesis 4:3–16

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A *NEW* short story by

D. R. BENSEN

Long-time EQMM readers know D. R. Bensen for—among his other published work—his Criminalimericks, which date back to 1967, his "Fu Manchusical" (EQMM, June 1969), and his Sherlockian short novel, Irene, Good-Night *(EQMM, January 1984). Mr. Bensen is a member of the Trap Door Spiders, the real-life counterpart of the Black Widowers.*

The Criminalimerick on page 60 is from Mr. Bensen's recent book, Biblical Limericks, Old Testament Stories Re-Versed, *published by Ballantine, with an Introduction by Isaac Asimov. It is, says Mr. Bensen, in more than one sense about murder one . . .*

CAREER MOVE

by D. R. BENSEN

There's an old-time saying about shoemakers coming in last that my grandma used to have, though I always thought it was nice guys. What she meant by it was that you should do what it is you do best and not try something you probably ain't geared for. She was right.

The thing is, you get as good as you can be at something, you get the hankering to see if there ain't something else you'd be good at, too—that could maybe pay more—and when you get to feeling like that, odds are that you'll come across what looks like a chance to find out.

Like I was on this morning commuter train, working the crowd. How you do that is, you take an early train up from the city to some place the trains start from, and when it gets crowded and there's lots of guys standing up, you kind of work your way through as if

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you was going to the john or the snack bar if they have one. And on the way you dip a few wallets—with nobody noticing anything, if you're as good at it as I am. And then you duck into the john, check out what's in the wallets, pocket the cash, and leave the rest tucked down behind the wastebasket or whatever. Get off the train a couple stops before the terminal and you're away with the proceeds before anybody notices what's gone down.

This morning I had three good ones, close to two hundred in cash. I left the credit cards and stuff in the wallets—you can use them okay, but it adds to the risk, and cash is good enough for me. But one of them had something more. Little key holder built into the wallet and a slip of paper tucked into where you put stamps.

On the paper was some numbers and letters: R22 L7 R5 L18. Had to be the combination for a safe. And there was the key to the house where that safe was, for sure. The thing about a safe is, you can keep a lot more stuff in it than you can in a wallet, and there's where I started forgetting about them shoemakers.

I copied the combination down, then took the key and pressed one side, then the other, deep into the slimy piece of soap on the sink. I checked the imprint—sharp and clear, plenty for Key Ring Charley to work on and come up with something guaranteed to work as well as the real thing.

Now, if it takes skill to lift somebody's wallet, I can tell you it takes double that to get it back without him noticing. I got this one back in this guy's pocket—cash still in it, which I hated to do, but he had to think it'd never been gone—by being sort of in the way as he was making for a seat somebody got up from. He bumped past me as if he figured I was racing him for the seat, then sat and read his paper, not looking at me, the way these commuter guys do when they beat somebody out.

I had my own paper, the local one from where the train started, and read it for the next two stops before I got off. The main story was about a jewel robbery up there, branch of one of the big city stores ripped off for a couple million in stones and stuff—Dornford's, it was called. Guard shot, safe blown, the usual. Police following leads, which I'd bet wouldn't amount to much unless some of the guys blew their share in the bars and bragged. Good pickings, but not for me. It'd be a sin to pass up the chance for a nice easy burglary, but I don't go for the strong-arm stuff and guns going off. People get hurt, including the guys using the guns, and getting hurt is not part of the job description of any work I'm interested in.

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Before I moved off toward the door at my station, I looked down at the guy whose wallet I'd lifted, then returned. So long, Mr. Arthur Hogan of 23 Crest Drive, Mapleview. Sleep well tonight, and don't dream about burglars.

Crest Drive was out toward the edge of Mapleview, though the whole town was mostly edge if you're used to the city. At 2:30 in the morning, it was still hot, though not as sticky as it had been during the day. It wasn't as quiet as I'd expected—there was a kind of hum, like a factory a couple blocks away, all over the neighborhood—window air-conditioners going full blast. Good, that'd hide any noise I might make, though I didn't mean to make any I could help.

My gut felt a little scooped out as I turned off the sidewalk toward the front door of 23, but I figured I'd look like a householder coming in late if anyone was looking out a window. Burglars go in the back way or through a window.

Key Ring Charley's key worked perfect. The lock turned easy, the knob turned easy, the door opened easy, and I was inside with the door shut behind me easy. So far, so good. I left the door just open enough not to latch—with bad luck, I might be making a fast exit.

I flicked my pencil flash once and saw there was a flight of stairs in front of me. Forget that. Upstairs was where Mr. Arthur Hogan was, and I'd already done what business I wanted to with him unless he was tacky enough to keep his safe in his bedroom.

Another flick showed me a dining room off to the left. Door at the back, probably the kitchen. To the right, living room. A couple sofas, bunch of chairs and little tables with lamps or what on them, floor lamp with a big shade like an old-fashioned lady's hat. A door at the back likely to be the den or office or whatever you call it—anyhow, the place where the safe would likely be according to what Slow Sam tells me that afternoon over a few drinks.

Slow Sam is about the best burglar going, and he'd filled me in on a few things I needed to know, like where the safe ought to be. "If it's upstairs, like in a bedroom, forget it," he says. "First time, you don't have the experience for it, probably not the nerve, neither."

"I don't want nerve," I says, "just the dope to do it nice and easy, no fuss."

I pick my way across the room, using the flash as little as I can, but making sure I don't hit any little tables or lamp wires. The room was what I figured—desk, easy chair, bookcases, lamp. And one picture square in the middle of one wall. "That's how they hide 'em,"

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Sam says. "They might as well put a sign up saying *Wall Safe, Lift To Open.*"

There was a window behind the desk and I slid it open, just in case the picture was wired or something and I had to leave before I finished. The window squeaked a little, but the noise of the air-conditioner was loud enough so I didn't figure anybody could hear it besides me.

I lifted the picture off its hook and set it on the floor real careful. No alarms going off. Sure enough, there was the safe. I checked my copy of the combination and worked the knob. Right so many, left so many, right again, left last. The lock clicked and I swung the door open.

The pencil flash showed me about three-quarters of an inch of green paper bundled up with a rubber band. The top one was a twenty. I slid it into my pocket. Don't stop to count, Slow Sam tells me, do that on your own time, not on the client's premises. The only other thing in the safe was a cloth bag tied up with a string at the top, bulging with whatever was inside it. I hefted it—pretty heavy. I didn't stop to open it and look, figuring that if it was worth Mr. Arthur Hogan's putting it in the safe, it was worth me taking it out.

I closed the safe and put the picture back. I started to close the window and wondered if I shouldn't maybe just leave that way. I looked out and blinked as the streetlight glared in my eyes. Bad idea. That side of the house was too lit up and anybody looking out a window would be on the phone to the cops as soon as they saw me climb out.

In the living room, I flicked the flash on and off again fast for the return trip. When I got to the hallway, I could see a little glow through the fan-shaped window in the top of the door and moved toward it.

All of a sudden there was a lot of light all around me. I dropped the bag, which hit the floor with a hell of a clatter, and spun around.

At the top of the stairs was Mr. Arthur Hogan. He was wearing pajamas, no robe, which was about right for the weather. He was also carrying a shotgun that looked like a cannon. It was not pointed at me, which was good. But the pistol in his other hand was, which was bad.

Nobody says anything for a minute, which makes sense. I mean, he's going to ask what am I doing there, or I'm going to say I can explain everything? Easy to see what I'm doing, no way to explain. I jerk my hands up high. He hasn't told me to, but I get the feeling

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that right now I want to do whatever might make Arthur Hogan happy without being asked. He is calling the shots, though I wished I hadn't thought of it that way.

Finally he jerks the pistol sideways. "Get over by—" he starts, but then the door behind me slams open and a voice says, "Police. Any trouble here?"

I look around and there, sure enough, is a cop. Young guy, stocky, wearing one of those light summer uniforms they let them use in the sticks. He has his gun out but isn't pointing it at anybody yet. Good, three guns in the room and only one of them pointed at me.

"I saw some movement at a window a couple minutes ago, Mr. Hogan," the cop says. "And there weren't any lights on, so I came over to check. Then the hall light came on so I thought I'd—"

He stopped. He was looking past me down at the floor, so I looked, too. The bag had opened when I dropped it, and what was in it had scattered out. The overhead light caught it and it was shining in about every color there is—necklaces, pins, rings, stuff like that. If it wasn't fake, it was enough to get me sent up for a long time. I wondered if it's like shoplifting, it don't count unless you get out the door with the stuff, but I guessed it wasn't.

"That's some of the haul from Dornford's!" the cop says. "How did this guy—"

I guess he was figuring that somehow I was the jewelry-store robber paying a late call and carrying the stuff with me for some reason. Wrong, but Hogan set him right the next second.

He lifted the pistol and fired. The cop gaped and fell back with a big hole like a giant cigarette burn in his shirt right beside his shield.

I don't know how I did it, but I jumped, maybe flew, through the air and hit the hall light-switch. The light went out and I landed in the living room and scrambled till I was halfway down it.

Everything was quiet except for the noise of the air-conditioner, which I hoped was loud enough to cover the sound of my heavy breathing. If Hogan had killed the cop, he wouldn't mind offing a burglar, and he'd be waiting out there till he heard something—and then he'd let go with the shotgun, and I'd finally see what happens when you get into a line of work you ain't qualified for.

In fact, I saw, he had to off me. A dead burglar and a dead cop make a picture you can do something with. A dead cop by himself takes some explaining.

Someone grabbed me by the arm. If it was Hogan, I was done for.

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If it wasn't, it was the dead cop, which wasn't much better. What I see in the movies, dead guys that crawl around are usually pretty sore at living guys. I was shook up enough to hold that thought for half a second, then let it go.

"You hurt bad?" I says, breathing it out real low.

"Bruised," the cop breathes back. "Bullet-proof vest. Almost didn't wear it, hot night. What the hell's up? You guys fighting about splitting the haul?"

"That stuff was news to me," I says. "Was just cleaning out the safe, that was what was in it. Didn't even look at it."

"Burglar, huh?"

"Not after this," I says. "Listen, what do we do? Hogan's got to try to get both of us."

"So we got to get him first," the cop breathes. "You go make a noise, draw his fire. He'll likely miss with the first shot and I can plug him as soon as he shoots."

The way I see it, what I will draw is a shotgun blast that don't even have to come close to hamburgerize me. "I got a better idea. Let's move toward the office or what over to the right. I left a window open in there, and we can ease out of it and be on our way."

"We don't know where Hogan is," the cop says. "He could be waiting there. We better do it my way, smoke him out."

I says nothing to this and start inching towards the office, as best I remember where it is. Right then, I come to a lamp wire, and I unplug it so's I won't snag it and knock something over. The thing is, the plug must of got caught in my shoe, because I feel a kind of tug at my foot, which alarms me, and I kick. Next thing, I hear a kind of rattle and thump, which I know later is the floor lamp going over and hitting the wall.

And the next thing after that there is a burst of light like a flashgun and a noise like a bomb and I see the lamp flying apart.

Then there's another shot, not so loud, and a clatter—Hogan's guns dropping to the floor—and a thump—Hogan doing the same thing. You could follow it as clear as a radio show.

I put the hall light on. Hogan was lying there, looking straight up at the ceiling light and not blinking. There was blood all over his pajama-top front and running into the jewels.

The cop looked shaky but excited. I could tell what he was thinking. Beat patrolman shoots it out with big-time jewel thief, recovers loot. Praised by commissioner, slated for promotion.

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He looks at me and I can tell he's thinking that "also nabs burglar" would look good on the record, too.

"Hey," I says, cheerful, "that was some teamwork. You put in a good word for me when your buddies come, maybe I won't come out of this too bad. You can tell them how I risked my life to draw Hogan's fire."

"You done that by accident," he says. "You was trying to bug out."

"That ain't how I recollect it," I says.

I wish I could get this cop in a poker game—you can read what he's thinking like his face was a TV screen. Being a solo hero is neat, but teaming up with a crook is not so neat. In fact, it's kind of comical. And comics don't get promotion so easy.

"I'll do you a favor," he says. "Split. Even if you don't have to do time, you're bound to draw a felony conviction and you don't want that. Just get gone, okay? And don't pull any jobs on my turf or you're likely to get shot resisting arrest even if you aren't resisting."

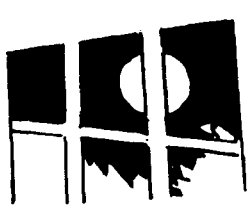
"Fine by me," I says. "I'm giving this work up anyways." I lean towards him and poke at the scorched hole in his shirt and feel the heavy plastic mesh of the bullet-proof vest. "Those are something, ain't they? Glad I don't have to wear one."

"I almost didn't," he says, "hot night like this. From now on, I'm gonna wear it even in the shower. Now get the hell out of here."

It was just before sunup when I got back to my room in the city. I waited till then to check out the wad of bills from Hogan's safe. About two grand—not bad for one night's work. On the other hand, I got to look at it as my lifetime earnings from burglaring since I ain't about to try it again. Grandma was right, stick to what you do best.

And I am the best, no question. I fished out from my pocket the rest of the night's haul and looked at it. Not much use for it, but a good reminder about last-place shoemakers or whatever.

Wonder how that cop explained where his shield went?



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THE JURY BOX
by ALLEN J. HUBIN

That the Mystery Writers of America have been issuing an anthology of members' stories yearly is well known; the MWA has been at this since the 1940s. Less well known, I expect, is that Britain's Crime Writers' Association and the fledgling Private Eye Writers of America also provide annual volumes of tales. We begin with a book from each source.

The best of the three, in terms of variety and polish, is the one from across the water: *John Creasey's Crime Collection 1986,* edited by Herbert Harris (St. Martin's, $12.95). This tenth CWA anthology of 16 stories (seven originally published in this magazine) offers mostly familiar names: Julian Symons, Simon Brett, Michael Gilbert, Peter Lovesey, Victor Canning, H. R. F. Keating, Andrew Garve, Ted Allbeury, and others. Two stories are in first appearances, including one by Penelope Wallace, daughter of thriller writer Edgar Wallace. A highly satisfying assemblage.

Just about as good, with the attractiveness at least for private-eye fanciers of a unifying theme, is *Mean Streets,* edited by Robert J. Randisi (Mysterious Press, $16.95). This second PEWA anthology offers also familiar names, but here an additional treat is that all 12 stories are new, and most are about their respective authors' established private investigators. We have, for example, Bill Pronzini and "Nameless," Max Allan Collins and Nate Heller, Loren D. Estleman and Amos Walker, Arthur Lyons and Jacob Asch, Sara Paretsky and V. I. Warshawski. We have an impossible crime, sundry missing persons; we have mostly murder in a cross-continental range of settings. Seek out and enjoy.

More tranquil, without crescendos but certainly well spun, are the webs in the MWA contribution, *Last Laughs,* edited by Gregory Mcdonald (Mysterious Press, $16.95). The theme is not so much humor—certainly not of the belly-shaking variety—as episodes amusing for the comeuppance dealt out at the end. Good authors are represented here, too—Mcdonald, Stanley Ellin, Edward D. Hoch, Henry Slesar, Frank Sisk—as well as names less familiar, and the whole is pleasant if unremarkable.

The Wychford Murders by Paula Gosling (Doubleday, $12.95) is particularly well done, with excellent plotting and very believable characters, and with only a faint wrong note at the end to slightly mar the proceedings. Luke Abbott left the town of Wychford, joined the police, rose to chief inspector, married, fathered children, lost his wife to death. Now, 18 years after leaving, murder brings him back to Wychford in an official capacity to which memories and a reappearing old love pose a considerable threat.

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Someone slits the throat of an apparently blameless factory worker. Then a far from blameless woman dies similarly, followed by a third female victim. What sort of killer is abroad in the land; how are the victims chosen?

Home Again by David Wiltse (Macmillan, $16.95) is a novel of personal discovery, mostly unwelcome dark discovery for FBI-agent-turned-lawyer Peter Ketter, but the account is certainly also a brooding, suspense-filled, even sometimes lyrical affair. Ketter's exploits in the Bureau bring him fame, but in mid-career, after clearing out a houseful of terrorists, he resigns. He's learned something. He takes his wife and teenage son to Cascade, small-town middle America, where he'd grown up and where his brother Edward is something of a local power. There Ketter continues to learn—about politics, about himself, about Edward and his sodden wife, about his son, about his boyhood best friend, all of this in connection with a series of knife killings and Ketter's reluctant investigation. I'm going to find this hard to forget.

Will Harriss's debut, *The Bay Psalm Book Murder,* was a scintillating performance, well worthy of the Edgar it collected and a very tough act to follow. Harriss tries, with *Trimor Mortis* (Walker, $15.95), which absent comparison with *Bay Psalm Book* would be quite acceptable, but as it is suffers from some early weakness in dialogue and its protagonist's lack of emotional involvement. Cliff Dunbar, professor of English, whose spectacularly successful textbook catapulted him into a life of leisure, returns here to help his sister recover an unfinished portrait. The subject, wealthy owner of a posh L.A. store, was murdered, and her unloving children, fashion-plate doctor and lawyer seem to be playing games. What's so deadly important about a piece of incomplete artwork?

Warren Carrier, novelist and poet and chancellor emeritus of the University of Wisconsin—Platteville, returns to our precincts with *Death of a Chancellor* (Dodd Mead, $14.95). The death of Bill Train, respected chancellor of the University of Wisconsin—Silvertown, proves to be murder. Train's widow asks Sean Fogerty, lawyer and native of this northern Wisconsin town of 10,000, to investigate, the competence of local law being short of awe-inspiring. Displaying an aptitude for sleuthing surprising even to himself, Fogerty tips over rocks in this apparently innocent community, coming up with a list of suspects both long and disconcerting. Fogerty is personable and Carrier is a most effective storyteller. Welcome them.

Riceburner (Scribners, $16.95) is the tough and engrossing debut of Richard Hyer. Harry Dane is running his industrial security agency in Chicago when an old friend, Cheryl Steffen, turns up, wanting his help. They plan to discuss her problem over lunch, but the restaurant blows up in their faces. A man is killed in the explosion, and Dane finds himself in serious trouble with the police: Cheryl—and

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her fiance—charge Harry with responsibility for the death. Hardly believing what's happening to him, now without transportation and his gun, Dane has to try to extricate himself, to figure out what sort of setup this is.

Joseph Hansen's latest about insurance investigator Dave Brandstetter is *The Little Dog Laughed* (Holt, $15.95). A renowned foreign correspondent dies by gunshot. Brandstetter is asked to determine if it was suicide. He demonstrates that it wasn't, and that satisfies the insurer. But not Dave, who looks for a killer in a world whose evils all seem attributable to right-wing beliefs, especially those associated with a certain Central American country and U.S. military interests therein. If you can swallow this bias, you'll enjoy a competent adventure with tension well sustained.

In La-La Land We Trust by Robert Campbell (Mysterious Press, $15.95) is filled with repulsive, depraved people, its dialogue is densely and repetitively profane, its view of the Los Angeles movie business perhaps the most bleak on record, the final scene the grisliest in memory. Yet with all this, the hardy reader will find the writer's artistry with his material shows through, that the ingredients fit snugly together. Walter Cape has millions but wants more. He decides to move in on the gross end of the porn business, and invites a few other moneyed L.A. folks of like insensibilities to co-invest in the enterprise. Meanwhile one of his little ventures has produced a headless corpse in L.A. and a corpseless head in New Orleans, matters which attract the attention of a clientless L.A. private eye named Whistler. To protect a lady who is ensnared in these ugly toils and is no better than she has to be, Whistler sets out to nail the ungodly.

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"Q"

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SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT TO EQMM READERS

Your votes for the Second Annual Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine Readers Award have been counted and the winner is:

Clark Howard for SCALPLOCK

Mr. Howard also won the first EQMM Readers Award last year (for "Animals" in the June 1985 issue) and six years ago he won an Edgar from the Mystery Writers of America for "Horn Man" (EQMM, 6/2/80). His consistent popularity with readers and critics calls to mind the enduring success in the short story of Ellery Queen, Stanley Ellin, and Roald Dahl, whose voices and choice of subject matter, like those of Clark Howard and all worthy writers, are unique, penetrating, eloquent, and memorable.

We are constantly amazed at the wide variety of topics Clark Howard treats in his fiction, never superficially, and think it is his caring interest in so much outside of himself, along with his willingness to probe deeply into himself—to give so much to his readers—that elicits such a warm response in return. The enthusiastic comments about his work on your ballots and in your letters support that conclusion. Unsurprisingly, his "The Last One To Cry" in the June issue rated fourth in your voting, just as last year another of his stories placed third.

Our heartiest thanks to you for your response and congratulations to Mr. Howard, to runners-up Thomas Adcock and Nell Lamburn, and to four regular EQMM contributors who won an exceptionally high cumulative vote for their stories—Edward D. Hoch, James Powell, Robert Barnard, and Brendan DuBois. Also to C. S. Kentis, whose "Whistling Women and Crowing Hens" in the November Department of First Stories received an impressive vote of approval.

One reader suggested we reprint the winning story or stories, but since we think these are destined for extensive anthologization in the future we are instead giving over the space to new fiction that might conceivably earn your vote for this year's Readers Award. But on the following page are descriptions of the three stories you chose as EQMM's best of 1986, each of them rich in character, setting, attitude, insight, mood—and consequence. That they are entertaining as well you have told us is the case.

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SCALPLOCK by Clark Howard (July 1986 EQMM)

The topic of AIDS is central to this story about a young Cheyenne Indian from Lame Deer, Montana, who comes to Las Vegas to exact vengeance for the drug death of his sister and is befriended by a streetwise sixteen-year-old girl prostitute.

THROWN-AWAY CHILD by Thomas Adcock (October 1986 EQMM)

Set in a decrepit voodoo section of New Orleans, the thrown-away child in this story is Perry Duclat, abused and deserted by his parents as a child, who in 1983 is paroled out of state prison after serving half of a seven-year sentence for "borrowing" a Rolls-Royce. Taken in by his aunt, he is mostly idle and uncommunicative until his outrage at the fraudulent "interest" Theophilus Flower, pastor and ruling landlord, takes in the lives of his home-indentured flock moves Perry to use his imagination and his hard-earned perceptions to outwit the slumlord at his own game—legally and triumphantly.

TOM'S THATCH by Nell Lamburn (July 1986 EQMM)

Think tidy English cottage, blue-grey Wiltshire flint, and a childless, petless couple of sixty-odd years. Mrs. Spreadbury is happily obsessed with her colorful garden (much admired by tourists) until the roof of their cottage inevitably needs a new thatch and Mr. Spreadbury implacably decides that Tom Molyneaux—a primitive, solitary man who lives in a filthy, rat-infested hut on the Plain—is the best thatcher thereabouts (true) and the best man for the job (not so true).

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***NEW* from**

HEIDI VANDERBILT

You will, we think, very much welcome more about Marta and Christine and their sons Ezra and Sammy from Heidi Vanderbilt's tense and affecting novel-in-progress.

"Two-fifty."

Christine smiled. Doug had always been her favorite of the island bartenders. She'd known them all, the greats and the near-greats. He was the best-looking. She'd seen all of him, too, one weekend several years ago. He'd been her cowboy for two nights, she his dogie.

"Two-fifty, Chris."

"I'm running a tab."

"Sorry." He didn't let go.

"And we'd begun so well," she sighed, counting the money in small change onto the bar. "Alors, deux dollars cinquante . . . "

LAST CALL AT THE BELLY-UP

by HEIDI VANDERBILT

Marta woke at seven, certain she had overslept her ten o'clock appointment with Sammy's social worker. She fumbled for her glasses, looked at the clock, and found she could barely read the dial the room was so bright. It had rained for five days and she hadn't bothered to pull the shades. Now, shielding her eyes from the bright October sun, she felt she was in a recovery room. Light exploded against the walls, the yellow-painted floor, the hooked rug her grandmother had made. She hung her nightgown on the peg behind the door and, whistling, pulled on faded jeans, a sweatshirt, socks,

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and sneakers. She tied a scarf around her hair to keep it out of her eyes and slipped the Buck knife she always carried into her pocket.

Sammy was already up, sitting in the hall outside Ezra's room, his clothes pulled on over his pajamas. She hugged him and sent him to his room to dress properly. Then she went in to Ezra. It took her a moment to find him. He slept with the covers pulled over his face, his body no more than a wrinkle, his head a bump that could easily be mistaken for a teddy bear or a pillow. He sighed in his sleep and turned over. She sat on the bed beside him.

"Good morning." She pulled the covers back, but he'd grabbed the sheet in both fists and resisted.

"Time to get up." She kissed his head through the blanket.

"No," he said.

"I'm going to make breakfast. What would you like?"

"More sleep."

"If you're up and dressed in five minutes, I'll make you French toast."

"No," he said, but she felt his fist loosen. He looked out at her. "Why bother?" he said. "*He'll* be there. I don't want to get up if *he's* going to be there."

Oh, God, Marta thought, is this ever going to get better? If only Ezra would give Sammy a chance. The boys had liked each other well enough before Sammy came to live with them, inviting each other to their first-grade birthday parties, playing together at recess. True, it had been Sammy who usually wanted to be with Ezra, but Ezra had sometimes called Sammy if his other friends were busy. Well, it's normal, she decided. If there were a new baby in the house, Ez would be cranky about that, too. It just takes time, and Sammy won't be with us forever. Just until the judge and the social workers get things sorted out, get him protected from his mother.

"You have to get up, Ezra," she said. "School. Come on. I'll see you downstairs in five minutes."

She was in the kitchen cracking eggs into a bowl when the phone rang.

"Is my son there?" It was Darren, calling from Los Angeles in his lawyer's I-represent-the-plaintiff voice.

"Your son is getting dressed."

"Shouldn't he be dressed already?" Darren argued his case. "He'll be late for school."

Marta found the whisk. "You tell him."

"You're his mother," Darren said. "It's your job."

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"Then let me do it!" she shouted.

"That for me?" Ezra stood in the doorway, shirt untucked, skinny feet bare. His toenails need trimming, she thought as she handed him the phone.

"Hi, Dad."

Marta felt a rush of guilt that Ezra knew by her angry voice she was speaking to his father. Maybe her behavior *was* despicable. She rested her elbows on the counter and looked out, chewing her thumb knuckle. At the bottom of the hill, a half mile away, smoke wandered out of the Timms's chimney, the only cloud.

What were Anne and Luther's mornings like? What did they talk about after twenty-five years? Their children? The animals? Sex? Did they smile over their morning coffee, thinking of each other in bed? Or was that over for them, the way it ended for her and Darren, drifting into a stretch of unrumpled nights they didn't mention?

The pond was full. The willow trunks stood in the water; the banks, mossy and slick, dipped below the water line, making a deep-green band at the shore. Ruckus trotted out of the woods, snuffling and lifting his leg every few yards. He went to the pond's edge, stood with forepaws in the water and lapped, snapped at a waterbug and sneezed. She would have to remind Ezra to feed him after school.

Sammy scuffed in, undone shoelaces making little clicks on the floor. He opened the door to the fridge, slammed it, opened the freezer and stood staring. Frost rolled out around his yellow head.

"There's juice on the table, Sammy."

He didn't move.

"Sammy, your juice is on the table."

She slipped bread slices, dripping and sizzling, into the skillet.

"Sammy! Shut that door!"

He closed it and came over to her. "Ma-ma-ma?"

"What?" She kissed his hair. He rubbed his cheek against her arm and whined like a puppy.

"You're weird," Ezra said. He had hung up with his father and sat at the table, drinking juice.

Sammy wrapped Marta's arm around his head.

"Careful! I'm cooking!"

"Mom, he is *so* weird. I hate it when he's weird like that."

"I'm not weird. You are."

"Sit down, Sammy." Marta slipped two pieces of French toast onto each plate and put them on the table. Sammy knelt on his chair.

Marta poured herself a cup of coffee and sat with the children.

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Sun warmed her back, and rainbows, cast by prisms in the window, traveled over the walls, the pots on the stove, and the children's faces.

"Full." Ezra pushed his plate away. He'd eaten the center out of one slice.

"You hardly ate anything!"

He puffed out his cheeks. "Go boom-splat," he said. Sammy giggled.

"That wasn't enough food, Ez."

He poked his stomach. "Megaton explosion."

"I'll eat it," Sammy offered.

"No," Ezra said. "Give it to Ruckus."

"Me!" Sammy cried.

"Finish your own food first, Sammy." Marta reached for his fork, speared a piece of toast, and fed him while she talked to Ezra. "What did your father want?"

"He wants me to spend next weekend with him."

Sammy swallowed. "He does?"

"Yes, he does." He looked at his mother. "He said he'll call you later and tell you what plane I'm on."

"Can I come?" Sammy asked.

"No!" Ezra shouted. "No, you cannot. No one invited you. He's *my* father."

Sammy's eyes filled.

"Marta," he asked, "isn't Ezra's father my father, too? If Ezra's my foster brother, isn't Darren my foster father? You're my foster mother, so—"

"Sorry, Sammy. It doesn't work that way."

Sammy looked at his plate. His eyelashes were wet, then the tears began running down his cheeks.

Ezra leaned close to him. "He's my father and you can't have him." He got up and scraped his plate into Ruckus's bowl, then put it in the sink. "I'll get my shoes on now." He left the room.

Sammy sat crying. He didn't sob or even move. Marta stroked his arm.

After a minute she said, "You better finish eating."

Sammy looked at the door to the hallway. "At least I have a brother." He snuffled. "I always wanted one."

Marta decided to take Ruckus with her into town. Then, if there was time, they'd go for a walk on the beach. He jumped into the

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yellow Subaru wagon and lay down on the back seat, crossed his forepaws, and rested his chin on them. Marta started the car, and as she bumped down the mile-long dirt drive she reached behind her seat and scratched his ears, catching a glimpse of her pale eyes frowning behind the thick lenses of her glasses in the rearview mirror.

She parked at the lower end of Main Street across from the Stitch In Time and left the car unlocked, key in the ignition. When she had lived in Los Angeles, she wouldn't have dreamed of not locking the car. Here, nobody locked off-season, and few people did even during the crowded summer months. Even though there were occasional thefts, locking was considered a sign of foreignness, of not belonging. She walked to the wharf, squinting against the sun. Ruckus followed her in his stiff-legged trot, zigzagging across the sidewalk to lift his leg against posts, building foundations, and car wheels.

The Belly-Up, bar and steakhouse by night, served hearty, greasy breakfasts and macrobiotic lunches. As the heavy wooden door closed behind her and Ruckus—who was not technically allowed inside, but whose presence, and that of other island dogs, was usually ignored—Marta scanned the room. Sun streamed in the picture windows, turning the smoky air opalescent. Two fishermen in hip boots and a carpenter in jeans so tattered his long-johns showed at the knees sat at the table nearest her. Across the room, four real-estate brokers flipped through a catalogue. One of them worked a calculator and another copied its numbers onto a pad. Several women sat by themselves at small tables, reading paperbacks and drinking coffee.

Marta recognized the checkout girl from the A&P, and waved to her. The girl jabbed her thumb at the glassed-in porch. Marta looked out and saw Belinda Grey's muscular back hunched under a dingy trenchcoat. Her short brown hair and the coat reminded Marta of a nineteen-thirties detective.

Marta went out to the porch and tapped Belinda's shoulder.

"Jesus *Christ!*" Belinda sloshed her coffee. "You scared me. This place gives me the creeps."

"It does? We could go somewhere else. Papa's Pizza is probably open, or the Coffee Shop."

Belinda waved her hand at the room. "Not this place—this *island.*"

"You don't like it?"

Belinda shivered. "Maybe in summer. But now? Brrr."

"But it's gorgeous today! This is my favorite time." Marta slid

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onto the bench facing Belinda. She pushed Ruckus under the table with her foot. "No tourists, just quiet. When I was a kid, we always came in the fall. I loved it. What are all those papers?"

The table top was littered with typed memos, official-looking documents, and handwritten legal pages. Marta recognized a letter she'd written to the Department of Social Services several months before Sammy came to live with her. She'd described Sammy's seventh birthday party this past July:

She and Ezra had to pick their way to Christine's house through piles of reeking, spilled garbage.

"I don't wanna go!" Ezra had tugged at her. "It stinks!"

"We have to," she whispered. "We accepted. He'd be disappointed. Anyway, they've already seen us."

Christine opened the door, leaned on the jamb, and bowed unsteadily. "Welcome." The inside of her mouth was black.

Dinner plates overflowed with cigarette butts and week-old chicken carcasses. Half empty glasses of Scotch littered the dozen end-tables that flanked the one chair and the one bed.

"You sleep in the living room?" Ezra asked, clinging to Marta's hand.

"I've closed off the rest of the house," Christine said in her private-school voice. She lit a cigarette. "This room is easier to heat."

"It's summer!" Ezra said.

Christine looked at him for a moment. "Sammy!" she shouted. "*Samuel!* Your little friend is here!" She took a long drag on the cigarette and blew smoke out her nose. Ezra coughed.

"Can I get you a drink, Marta?"

Marta tried to think of something she could drink in spite of the room's stench. She couldn't imagine anything coming out of Christine's faucets as safe.

"Do you have any ginger ale?"

"Wouldn't you prefer shampoo? A bit of the bubbly? This is a *party*, you know. *Sammy!* Where is the little bastard?"

Sammy crawled out from under the bed, his face flushed. "Hi. Did you bring me a present?"

"Happy birthday, Sammy!" Marta said.

"Happy birthday," Ezra mumbled. "Here." He handed Sammy two small, wrapped presents. Then he grabbed Marta's hand again.

Christine swooped down in front of Ezra. "How very, very kind of you to remember sweet Samuel," she slurred.

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Ezra looked at Marta, then at Sammy. "Let's go to your room," he said. "You can open them there."

"This is my room."

"There's only one bed," Ezra said. "Where does your mom sleep?"

"Why don't you two play outside?" Marta suggested. "Is anyone else coming?"

"Probably not." Sammy looked from the presents in his hands to his mother, who was opening a bottle of Boodles gin, to Marta. "We'll go outside if you'll make my mother remember the cake."

"*Of course* I'll remember the cake!" Christine snapped. "I baked it for you, didn't I?" She poured a glass of champagne and handed it to Marta. "Here."

"I wanted ginger ale."

"You were kidding."

"No, I wasn't."

Christine spun around and threw open the refrigerator door. Marta looked over her shoulder. There, in the midst of incredible filth, was the most beautiful birthday cake she'd ever seen.

"You made that, Christine?"

Ezra leaned far enough away from her to look in. "Wow!"

It had white frosting with little pink and yellow sailboats on a blue sea around its sides. On the top, Captain Ahab harpooned Moby Dick. Seven candles were worked into the design, the eighth, the one to grow on, rose out of the whale's spout.

"It's beautiful."

"Moby *Dick*," Sammy giggled. "Get it?"

Christine pulled out a bottle of ginger ale and handed it to Marta. She drank Marta's champagne in one gulp and poured herself another.

"She's getting sloshed," Sammy told Marta. "If I go out, I'll never get any cake. She'll forget. She'll screw up."

"Will not!" Christine shouted.

"Will too!" Sammy's chin wobbled.

Marta interrupted. "Your mother and I will get things ready, Sammy. You go play. You'll get your cake."

Ezra tugged her little finger. "You'll stay right here, Mom? Promise?"

"Promise."

Sammy and Ezra went out. In the next twenty minutes, while Marta cleared a space on the table, Christine drank three more glasses of champagne. Marta wiped the table off as best she could.

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There were no sponges, no paper towels, no towels at all that she could find, so she used the hem of her T-shirt and some water. Christine finished the bottle of champagne and started her second tumbler of gin.

"I ushta be a fashion model." Christine leaned against the couch, waving her cigarette in grand arcs. "Would you believe it?"

"Sure," Marta lied.

"I wash a beauty. Weighed a hunert-an'-four an' had hair like honey."

"Uh-huh."

"Whatever happened to me, Marta?" Christine asked. "Marta, my Marta-friend, what became of Chrishtine?" She was crying.

"I don't know." Marta looked out the streaky window at the boys playing in the driveway. "I just met you three months ago."

Christine slumped onto the couch.

Marta couldn't find a knife, so she pulled hers from her jeans pocket, opened it, washed it, dried it on her shirt, then rummaged for forks and spoons. She called the children in.

"Birthday happy, Shamuel!" Christine said. "Sham-u-el."

Sammy looked at his mother. "You promised!"

"'m not drunk," Christine giggled. "Shober."

"Never mind, Sammy," Marta said. "Come to the table."

While the cake was still in the fridge, she used Christine's lighter to light the candles. She tried not to look at the brownish-green mold on the walls, the bulging plastic containers. She tried not to breathe.

"You coming, Chris?" No answer. "Okay, here goes. Close your eyes, kids."

She sang "Happy Birthday," with Ezra and Sammy joining loudly. "Happy birthday to *me!*" Sammy shouted. Then she helped Sammy blow out his candles and cut the cake.

"Who gets the first piece?"

"Ezra," Sammy said. "My best friend."

Ezra made a face. "I don't want any."

Marta scowled at him until he gave in.

"Oh, okay," he conceded.

"Who gets the second piece?"

"You do, Ma-ma-ma."

Ezra glared. "Her name is Marta."

"Ma-ma-ma."

Christine sat up. "What about *me?* This is *my* party, too."

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Sammy cut himself a huge slice and toppled it onto his plate. He scooped all the icing onto his spoon. "You're shitfaced." He stuffed the spoon into his mouth.

"Sammy!" Marta said.

Christine swung at him, but couldn't reach. "You little bastard, I should have had you aborted."

Then she threw up.

Belinda was looking at the paper-strewn table. "I'm trying to get everything in order for the case conference Thursday," she said. She had the voice of a little girl, high and soft. When Marta first met her, she couldn't believe that wispy voice came out of that body.

A waitress came by and Marta ordered coffee and a bran muffin.

"I'll have another order of pancakes," Belinda said and Marta noticed an empty, syrup-smeared platter pushed to the end of the table. "With bacon," Belinda called after the waitress. She grinned at Marta. "Gotta keep the furnace stoked."

Belinda was the biggest woman Marta had ever seen, bigger even than Anne Timms. Not beefy like Anne, but rangy. She looked like the Marlboro man.

Belinda shuffled the papers into a messy pile. "Okay," she said. "Down to business. How's Sammy?"

"Better, I guess. He sleeps through the night sometimes. He can concentrate longer."

"How long?" Belinda was scribbling in pencil on the back of one of the legal pages. Marta rubbed Ruckus's back with her sneakered foot.

"Well, if I insist, he can play by himself for about five minutes. Then he either comes to me or to Ezra."

"How does he ask for attention?"

"He whines like an animal."

Belinda looked at her. "Are you seeing evidence of sexual abuse?"

"How would I know?" Marta asked.

"Does he talk about sex a lot, in a way that's different from other seven-year-olds?"

"He's always making really sophisticated dirty jokes. He seems to get every sexual allusion on TV, then he giggles hysterically. And when the man came to fix the washing machine, Sammy grabbed at him."

"Oh, brother," Belinda said. "Anything else?"

Marta looked out over the harbor. Most of the boats had been

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hauled months ago, but under today's bright autumn sun the water looked warm enough for swimming.

"Marta?"

"Last night he asked me if he could have made his mother pregnant."

The waitress arrived, balancing plates on her forearms, four cups of coffee grasped in her hands, two more stacked on top of them. Marta took one cup and the plate with her bran muffin, Belinda took her pancakes, and the waitress hurried to another table.

Belinda watched her. "How does she keep from dropping them? Whoever said that's unskilled labor?" She poured syrup over her bacon. "Look at me. I couldn't hoist all that china around all day long. She looks like Mia Farrow, but I'll bet she's twice as strong as me."

Marta smiled. Under the table, Ruckus sniffed the bacon.

"That was a diversion," Belinda said. "I needed a break. I've never gotten used to adults using kids for sex." She shook her head. "I've seen enough of it, but I'll never get used to it." She cut a pancake in half, folded it in thirds and speared it. "So," she said, elaborately casual. "He thinks he made his mother pregnant." She put the food in her mouth.

Marta nodded. "I explained that wasn't possible, but he didn't look like he believed me."

Belinda set her fork down. "She's *not* pregnant, is she? If she is, Sammy will never believe he wasn't responsible. Child's logic: if it happened and it's bad, it's my fault."

Marta broke her muffin into pieces. "I don't know. Wouldn't you know first?"

"How would I?" Belinda said. "The last time I saw her was in court two months ago."

"Me, too," Marta said.

Belinda stared. "What about her visits to Sammy?"

Marta pushed the muffin pieces into a circle, a fence. "She never came."

Belinda wrote that down. "You know, if you were on the mainland I'd be in closer touch with you. I'd know a lot more about what's going on. But way out here—you're so remote."

"I tried calling you," Marta said.

Belinda looked at her plate. "It's my caseload. I guess that's no excuse. But I've got forty open cases all through the Seattle suburbs. I'm on the road five days a week, officially. Unofficially, it's more

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like six and a half. I try to get to everyone, but I can't. I have to make choices about who to see first. Crises have precedence." She looked at Marta. "You seemed to be handling everything pretty well."

"I am!" Belinda had to believe she was handling things well. If she didn't, Sammy might be taken away from her, be in even more danger. "Do you have a lot of cases like this one?" she asked, easing off the subject.

"No, this one's unusual. I do a lot of protective work, going in and working with abusing families. I do a lot of removals and placing kids in foster care. But I'm rarely involved with wealthy parents like Christine."

"The rich don't usually abuse?" Marta asked.

"The rich don't get caught. It's handled differently. Expensive lawyers, boarding schools. Different solutions."

"So why didn't Christine get lawyers to help her get away with it?" There were clouds piling up along the horizon. "How come Christine got caught?"

"She got caught, Marta, because you were willing to testify against her. In a way, you caught her."

Marta saw Christine as a large blonde swordfish she had reeled in, hung upside down on a scale, her legs turned to fins.

Belinda stacked her platter on top of the other one. "I hope you know what you're in for. Poor parents can't get the kind of legal backing Christine can. If I were going to advise you—strictly off the record, understand—I'd say don't testify."

"And what about Sammy?"

"They say children are formed by the time they're three years old. It may be too late for Sammy."

"You can't believe that! He's only seven years old! How would you like someone to say that about you, or about your kid? You think Christine should just get away with what she's done? Sammy should spend the rest of his life in that madhouse?"

Ruckus, alarmed by the tone of her voice, whined beneath the table.

"Sammy may be trading one kind of madhouse for another." Belinda reached over for Marta's muffin. "You not going to eat this?" Marta shook her head. "I had a case in Irondale," Belinda said, buttering. "Nice foster family, doing everything for the kid: dancing lessons, dolls, Girl Scouts. The kid's got wacko birth parents. Her father's a lush. I thought the mother might be okay—she was going

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for counseling—then she started being attacked by space aliens. Contacted her through her boom box."

Marta looked puzzled.

"Her radio. The kid's mother wrapped herself in tin foil and showed up at the foster family's for Sunday brunch. Tried to dress the kid in Reynold's wrap to save her from the Martians, too."

"So?" Marta asked.

"So the last time we went to court, the judge, in his infinite wisdom, gave her back the kid."

The heavy clouds covered part of the harbor. Marta saw a chop start in the glassy water. No more rain, she prayed.

"Where are they now?" she asked.

"I should know? I won't know, ever. And if I do hear, it won't be good news. The foster family quit after that, and they were one of our most experienced families. They burned out."

"I won't burn out," Marta said.

Belinda patted her hand. "*Good for you, dear,*" *she said.* "But just remember, a lot can happen that you can't control. Some good, a lot bad. Try not to get too emotionally invested, that's all."

"But that's been the tragedy of Sammy's life! No one's wanted to get involved. No one's invested in him except Christine. How will we know if he can make it as a regular person in the normal world if he's never given the chance?"

The waitress cleared and Belinda asked for the check.

"Don't get your hopes up, Marta. We don't even know what the judge will decide this Friday. He could give Sammy back to her. I'm just trying to tell you that whatever happens, it won't be easy."

Marta nodded and reached for her wallet.

"I'll get it," Belinda said. "I ate your food, too."

Marta left the tip.

The ship's clock said 12:50. Ten minutes to last call and the Belly-Up was practically deserted. The bartender counted bills into an antique cash register. One waitress in a black wrap-around skirt and heavy black sweater leaned against the cherry paneling, reading *The Mosquito Coast* and scratching her knee. The other wiped wooden table tops. Two fishermen at one end of the bar watched a *Mork and Mindy* rerun. At a table by the bay window that overlooked the dark harbor, three men in business suits ate sandwiches and chips.

Christine unbuttoned her fur coat and hooked her leg over the

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barstool. Time for a quickie. She cleared her throat, which felt parched. She hadn't had a drink all day.

The bartender didn't look up. "What'll it be?"

"Kir," she said. "As ever."

He looked at her then.

"Well! Christine!" He reached under the bar, brought out the white wine and cassis, poured. He pushed the drink over to her but held onto the glass.

"Two-fifty."

She smiled. Doug had always been her favorite of the island bartenders. She'd known them all, the greats and the near-greats. He was the best-looking. She'd seen all of him, too, one weekend several years ago. He'd been her cowboy for two nights, she his dogie.

"Two-fifty, Chris."

"I'm running a tab."

"Sorry." He didn't let go.

"And we'd begun so well," she sighed. *"Alors, deux dollars cinquante."*

She counted the money in small change onto the bar, took her drink and the little napkin he'd put under it, and walked over to the window by the businessmen. She pressed her forehead against the cold glass. Now the storm was over, the harbor was dead calm. Lights from the deserted Yacht Club dock reflected toward her like brass megaphones. Then a Boston Whaler, light astern, crossed the channel, breaking the megaphones into choppy waves. The fractured light made her ears ache. She stuck her little finger in her ear and wiggled it. When the water calmed, she looked back at the Yacht Club dock.

At first she just saw the icy dock and pilings, the black, empty slips where the summer people tied their boats in July and August. Then she saw—or did she?—a great crowd of people in summer clothes, men in loafers and madras dinner jackets, women in strapless cocktail dresses, toasting each other with gin-and-tonics. There was her mother—see? she wasn't dead—wearing the green sleeveless dress she had bought at Elizabeth Arden in Los Angeles the summer Christine turned twelve. Her mother was waving to her, calling, smiling as though she'd been waiting on the Yacht Club dock all this time, all these years, just to see her little girl.

Christine pressed hard against the window to hear what her mother was saying, but another boat crossed, the reflections broke up, and the summery people at the Yacht Club vanished into the

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October night. Christine felt her mother falling away from her, pulling her eyes, her ears, her heart after.

She patted herself to make sure she hadn't disappeared, too, and had a swallow of her drink. It made the pain better. Too bad all the pills were gone. She'd get more tomorrow from Dr. Glenn. She'd take ten then.

The men at the table behind her were laughing. She didn't want to hear their laughter. Her mother had tricked her again, appearing, disappearing. No one else's mother did that, not the waitresses', not the bartender's, not the mothers of these laughing men. Or did they? Didn't everyone see the world as she did? They just wouldn't admit it. They kept it secret from each other, didn't want to be called crazy. They wanted *her* to seem crazy when really only she was sane.

She got a triple vodka at the bar and went back to the bay window. She tried to see into the darkness beyond the Yacht Club. Somewhere out there, beyond that deserted building, inland, over the hills, her little boy Sammy was living in a foster home, waiting for her. On her birthday, in two more days, she'd be thirty. Sammy was going to be her present.

She sat on the table next to the men, put her feet on a chair, and cupped her chin in one hand. She drank most of the drink and rattled the ice cubes in her glass. One of the men scowled at her. Bastard, she thought, and rattled the ice louder. The liquor was warming her, spreading into her wrists and ankles, relaxing them. Booze felt like love, and booze and pills felt like falling in love. She sighed and had another swallow.

At least she didn't have to deal with Sammy's father, whoever he was. She used to look in her son's face, trying to figure which one it had been. She thought she knew once: a fisherman, she'd decided, a guy she'd met in one of the island bars—this one?—and spent some nights with. She even remembered his name—it started with a B, didn't it? Barney? Barry? Bernie? Oh, well, she'd known once.

She'd written to him once, in care of the ship he worked on, and told him about the baby. But he didn't answer her letter. After a while, she wasn't sure she'd ever mailed it. Maybe he wasn't the right guy, anyway. If he was the right guy, if he had answered, he might have insisted on living with them, spending time with Sammy, complaining about her. It was better for her and Sam that it be just them, just them against the world. Sammy was man enough for her. She'd made sure of that. Taught him all there was to know, from the very beginning.

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She thought of Sammy, his pudgy child's body growing in the bed beside her, growing up into a man with her. She'd shared her boy friends with him, since he didn't have a father. What was wrong with that? She loved him, she taught him, she raised him. How dare they criticize her? That was how her father raised her. No one interfered with him, not even her mother. Why were people persecuting her and Sammy? She was a single parent, that was why. A woman alone.

Two more days to enjoy being single. Having Sammy was like being married, or like living with someone. He always got up early, crawled out of bed letting cold air in under the covers. He'd fix his breakfast and hers, too. She smiled, remembering the scrambled eggs he made her, the coffee, the cinnamon toast. He'd bring it to her in bed, the way she liked. Just like room service at the George V in Paris. He was seven now, able to carry everything on one big tray. Hotels were so lovely, so romantic.

She finished her drink, caught an ice cube between her thumb and forefinger, and popped it in her mouth. The businessmen had been discussing what to have for dessert. One signaled the waitress. "Miss!"

Christine stood up. "You called?"

But the waitress who had been wiping the tables was already there, writing up their orders. When she returned to the bar, Christine threw an ice cube at her. The waitress wheeled.

"I'm *terribly* sorry." Christine held up her glass and jiggled it. "I sloshed too hard."

The waitress slammed into the kitchen. Christine leaned toward the men. "Is there anything *I* can do for you, sirs?"

They looked at each other. She raised her empty glass. "Get you anything while I'm up? A martooni? A rum-ba?"

They didn't say anything.

She went over to the bar for another. The floor, she noticed for the first time, had a slight tilt to it. She looked down, trying to figure whether it tilted to starboard or to port.

"One more, *encore, cheri!*" she called to Doug, who was lining bottles against the mirrored wall. She leaned against a stool. One of the fishermen had left, the other was eating beer nuts and doing the *TV Guide* crossword puzzle. His small weathered hands grasped the pencil, his chapped white lips sucked the eraser. She started toward him.

"Your drink, Chris." Doug, spoiling her fun.

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She threw money onto the counter and went to the cigarette machine. She took a quarter from her pocket and dropped it through the slot. Two more followed. Three Alices going after white rabbits. She tugged a knob, got a pack of Vantage, and waved it at Doug.

"Voila! Coffin nails *pour moi."* She pulled the cellophane wrapper open with her teeth.

Doug wiped the bar. "Last call!"

The door behind him opened and a tall man entered. He walked to the bar, pulled some bills from the hip pocket of his jeans, and spread them on the bar. He smiled at himself in the mirror. Without being asked, Doug got the newcomer a draft beer and took two dollars out of the fan of bills. In the mirror, the man shifted his smile from his own image to Doug's face, then back. He raised his glass to his lips.

The businessmen came to the register to pay their tab. While Doug made change and said goodnight to them, Christine drank and studied the new man: over six feet, dark-blond hair, wide cheekbones practically hiding small dark eyes. Under a worn leather jacket, his broad shoulders sloped to a tiny waist. Nice ass in very tight jeans.

She had another swallow and approached him.

"Hello," she said.

He looked at her through the mirror.

"It's dead in here tonight," she said.

He drank his beer, watching her.

"This whole island's dead." She swung her arm, spilling her drink. The man handed her his napkin. She brushed his fingers with hers. *"Merci."* She smiled into his eyes.

"Cut it out, Chris."

Doug, damn him, was butting in. Jealous. She could see a green light glowing around his head, an aura. An aurora bora. She hiccoughed, bit her lip to hide it.

The man in jeans pushed two more dollars at Doug.

"We already had last call." Doug spoke to him as if he were deaf. "No more," he enunciated. "Understand?"

The man pushed the money out further.

"No more!" Doug shook his head no in exaggerated sweeps.

Then the man handed his money to Christine. She didn't know what to do with it. They were looking at her, Dougie and this new dude. She tucked the bills into her bra, one to each cup, and licked her lips.

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"Chris, leave him alone," Doug said. "He doesn't even speak English."

Now she understood. He was someone like herself, someone who spoke in codes that other people didn't understand—someone, perhaps, who could see her mother like Christine did. They both needed a drink. Definitely.

"One more, Dougie, please?"

She was hiccoughing all the time. She covered her mouth so they wouldn't notice. She smiled up at the stranger from behind her hand, felt her cheeks rise toward her eyes. She should have recognized those cheekbones, just like hers. Hatched from the same cosmic egg. He'd been sent to be with her these last days before little what's-his-name came home. "Just a short one, Dougie, please?"

"Out, Chris. And leave this guy alone."

"C'mon Dougie." She pulled out the front of her dress. "Fill 'er up."

The stranger passed behind her, blew on her neck, and went outside. He stood holding the door open, letting cold air in—like Sammy in the mornings. Doug looked cross.

"Whazza matter, Dougie-do? You mad?"

The last fisherman, finished with his puzzle, waved as he left.

"Beat it, Chris," Doug said. "Out before I throw you out."

She wondered if she should stay and fight. But the door was open, the night cold, her new friend waiting.

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a *NEW* short story by

JEFFRY SCOTT

Nick told Woman Police Constable Brenda Diggs: "You haven't listened, dear. Offer to make Mrs. Brandell a nice cup of tea while we chat and she'll sling you out of the window, personal radio and all. We're there on sufferance. Don't stare, don't speak, don't touch anything, and it'll be lovely."

After twelve minutes' experience of the CID man, Brenda hated him . . .

THE ONLY SURE WAY

by JEFFRY SCOTT

For a woman prizing privacy, and fiercely, haughtily determined to preserve it, Mrs. Laura Brandell was generating obsessive interest among outsiders.

"What d'you mean, this alters nothing and she still won't play?" Superintendent Greatrex demanded. "One or the other of them, maybe both, had her son killed—set him up, crossed him up, and carved him up. She's bound to talk when you explain that."

Detective-Inspector David, fair-haired and rosy, was shaking his head gently. His dry-cleaning cost a small fortune because he persisted in wearing silver-grey suits and even white ones if given half a chance. On joining Rosetta Street CID, there had been unkind jokes about male models or twits losing their way to the wedding reception. These withered in the face of his performance.

Greatrex, skidding from confidence to pique, fretted, "She hates our guts because of that search-warrant nonsense a few years back—but she can't be daft enough to let that hamper us now. Bloody woman had no business carrying on like a villain just because her precious boy was a wrong 'un. She's gentry, ought to know where

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her duty lies." Superintendent Greatrex had been a London copper all his adult life but you couldn't take the country out of the boy and he had rural respect for breeding.

His bluster concerned history from before David's time in the Division. Max Brandell had been involved in a major bullion robbery of the 'seventies and was hiding behind an impregnable alibi. The police tried exerting pressure through his mother, searching her flat with gusto enough to wreck it. She wasn't the sort to watch meekly. They'd counted on it—giving pretext for her arrest. A City magistrate less vicious than deeply stupid agreed to a remand in custody "for further inquiries." In other words, Mrs. Brandell spent the best part of a month in Holloway Prison before, Inspector David's forerunner offering no evidence, the case was dropped.

The ploy failed because Max Brandell stuck to his alibi and his mother showed stony equanimity over being locked up for twenty-three hours a day. But stoic or no, Mrs. Brandell "couldn't take a joke," as the heartless CID jest goes, and she had detested the police ever afterward.

Hearing the tale while exploring his new territory—Constabulary virtue gets short shrift around that neighborhood while sins are never forgotten—Nick David took the trouble to research it. He'd wondered why a respectable woman, no longer young, should have withstood and even thrived on an ordeal known to shatter hardened females half her age. He learned that when Laura Brandell was still a teenager in the early 1940s, she had been recruited and trained by Special Operations Executive, the covert wartime group charged by Winston Churchill with "setting Europe ablaze." Official history was vague about what Mrs. Brandell had done after being parachuted into France, but she survived for half a year and emerged with a medal. Inspector David concluded that Holloway, squalidly grim as it might be, must have struck such a graduate as tame.

Later, trying to raise the subject with her, David had been ruthlessly snubbed. Mrs. Brandell had a trick of speaking quietly, in an unstressed manner—robbing words of emotional flavor so that one leaned closer and concentrated. He'd blinked at the cold anger in, "How dare you make small talk out of the war! You weren't even born then."

"Blasted woman," Greatrex grumbled. "It's not our fault she married beneath her and came down in the world. After Solly Brandell did a runner and left her with the baby, she could have returned to her family—they begged her to get out of here. Not her! She's lived

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in a slum from that day to this, with one of the worst toerags in the manor for a son—Max was pure Solly Brandell, plus guts—and still looks down her nose at the rest of us like Lady Muck in person. Touched in the head if you ask me, and with a martyr complex to boot."

Nick David murmured, possibly to himself, "Well, she *was* martyred."

Wincing at the thrust, Superintendent Greatrex said hurriedly, "Just make her see sense, Nick. She owes it to her boy, eh? That's the line to take."

"Do my best," David agreed neutrally. The last remark was rich even for Greatrex, a decent, straight enough copper but a terrible humbug. The Superintendent was not interested in avenging one of the worst toerags in the manor—he saw a shortcut to clearing up a half-million-pound payroll robbery.

Crammed into the tip of the triangle where Rosetta Street joins Great Northern Prospect, Raleigh Rents is a maze of blind byways, and a disgrace. Since 1949, Mrs. Brandell had lived in just about the worst building there.

Maybe when Charles Dickens was in his prime and charitable citizens built flats for "the clean poor," Peerless House deserved the name. Four cliffs of sooty bricks around a sun-swallowing central courtyard, it evoked Hollywood's idea of a Victorian jail and workhouse rolled into one. Now the barracks was peerlessly glum.

Following Inspector David through the archway from Great Northern Prospect, Woman Police Constable Brenda Diggs swallowed hard. Her freckled face was as open as a freshly laid farm egg and dirt upset her nearly as much as bereavement. Through a window somewhere above, a shrill woman was yelping like a vixen, either transported by lust or more probably taunting a swain in some nearby apartment.

Nick smiled crookedly. "So unlike the home life of our own dear Queen," he quoted absently. WPC Diggs blushed and frowned. Leading her upstairs, his tone changed. "Don't be fooled by the environment. Mrs. Brandell isn't a seedy old haybag to be patronized. Pat her on the head and she'll take your hand off."

Brenda Diggs nodded tautly. He needn't have reminded her that she was along for show, thanks to new Met Police policy decreeing that a female officer must attend CID interviews with women living alone. But she couldn't resist implied protest. "I'm sure she must be

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terribly cut up about her son. I was here yesterday when Mr. Greatrex came round to break the news."

And got a flea in his ear, Inspector David added inwardly. Adding aloud, kindly, "You haven't listened, dear. Offer to make Mrs. Brandell a nice cup of tea while we chat and she'll sling you out of the window, personal radio and all. We're there on sufferance. Don't stare, don't speak, don't touch anything, and it'll be lovely." After twelve minutes' experience of the CID man, Brenda Diggs hated him.

Evidently Mrs. Brandell shared the feeling because, having opened the front door of 214, she simply walked back into the cluttered living room and sat down, leaving David to follow or wait outside. She was a tall woman, shapeless but not soft, covered rather than dressed in dingy claret-colored Crimplene slacks and layer upon layer of pullovers and cardigans. The flat was so savagely cold that WPC Diggs expected to see puffs of white when anyone talked.

Just as evidently Mrs. Brandell believed the lore that dust gets no worse after the first five weeks. Her home was untidy, but systematically so. To one side of the armchair stood an electric hotplate, small stacks of canned and packet food, throwaway plates and beakers in clear plastic bags, and a coffee-maker brewing what looked to be liquid tar-deposit. On the other side, within reach, were unstable buttes and pillars of books. No TV, but a Sony world-radio with an extra wire aerial, furry with fluff and trailing small cobwebs slung around the cornices.

Though she had to be sixty and the rest, Mrs. Brandell could have been any age apart from young. Nick wondered what Solly Brandell had seen in her all those years ago. Leadership qualities perhaps. David happened to like the look of her—asexual strength so that she could have sat for the portrait of a Norman knight or one of Nelson's band of brothers—but she'd never been a beauty.

"What is it this time? Lies, stratagems, bullying, or futile paperwork?" she inquired calmly and with a wounding flick of genuine curiosity.

"None of those, I hope." Inspector David raised an eyebrow for permission, waited fruitlessly, and then sat down anyway, his knees nearly touching her own. "Sorry to be a bore, but there has been a surprising development and you need bringing up to date. You needn't say a word just yet—actually we'll get on faster if you simply listen."

He began ticking points off on his fingers. "There are two firms

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worth the name active round here at present. Billy Albanini runs one and Tom Macksey the other. As you know, Billy and Tommy have been at each other's throat for several years.

"Just after Christmas there was a peace conference and they split the territory. But it went further. The two of them would do a payroll job, settle all those wicked stories about them not having bottle. And it would seal the agreement.

"Naturally that was fraught with possibilities, seeing that Tommy is treacherous and devious enough for it not to be funny any more, and Billy being worse if anything. So they agreed it would be a very tight operation, just the two of them and a brace of hired goons who weren't in either of their gangs. That way, there would be no question of one partner ripping the money off as soon as it was taken. Do you follow?"

Brenda thought that he might as well have been dropping pebbles into a well so deep that the impact was inaudible.

"Then," he went on, "they needed a getaway driver. Which is where your Max came in. I won't flannel you about Max, Mrs. Brandell. We both know he'd never be senior prefect or star of the seminary. But he was an ace driver and, thanks to you no doubt, by professional-criminal standards he was dead straight. The ideal mercenary. Albanini and Macksey wanted him badly enough to offer a substantial cut of the proceeds instead of a flat fee, and he swallowed.

"Okay, the team goes down to that electronics factory in Kent. Billy and Tommy didn't have to be quite as rough on the head cashier and that poor little girl clerk, but what can I tell you? It's their nature. They got away with five hundred thousand pounds and change, all cash. But then things departed from the norm. Understand, this is circumstantial and reconstruction, our idea of what must have happened.

"Max drives the four raiders away in a Transit van. They get rid of their stocking masks, ditch the weapons, and, within five miles of the factory, do something odd. The two hired thugs take off on a motorbike and Billy and Tommy transfer the stolen money, stuffed into black-plastic garbage sacks, to a station wagon, which your Max proceeds to drive toward London while Albanini and Macksey follow in the van.

"There are two explanations. Either Billy and Tommy felt that a vehicle with a single passenger had a better chance of getting through if there was a chase or roadblocks set up. Or they still didn't

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trust each other and, by agreement, the take would be split somewhere safe and private with both firms' muscle present to guarantee fair play. That rings true—Max as stake-holder until the money reached London. He'd never make off with it, and in any case those two beauties were in the van keeping an eye on him. Like all good con tricks, the real reasons for the arrangement could be something totally different."

Nick paused invitingly for the bait to be taken. Disappointed, he added casually, "Of course, Max would have told you all about the plan—he always did, you two were like that."

With a half bored quality, as of one inspecting insects from a great height, Mrs. Brandell remarked, "I'd rather not hear my son's name in the mouth of an unpleasant specimen like you." Her control flawed momentarily, then her nostrils flared with pride and venom. "At least he had a Viking funeral in that accident. Flame and booty. You'll never get that money back."

David gaped at her. With his drooping honey-colored forelock and long, scrubbed hands clasped around an upraised knee, he could have been a schoolboy. "Of course, it's all over the manor and makes a lovely tale, seeing that everybody hates Billy Albanini and Tommy Macksey. They go to all the trouble of nicking half a million quid and *wham*—Max blows a tire at sixty miles an hour and they're left with an incinerated wheelman and a load of burnt paper and smuts blowing away across the fields in the snow. It's the stuff of folk legend, Mrs. Brandell, fairy gold turning into autumn leaves once the spell wears off."

WPC Diggs cleared her throat repressively. This was not the way to address a grieving mother. David and Mrs. Brandell ignored the sound, absorbed in their duel.

Nick was confiding. "The Super, old Greatrex, sees you as a traitor-to-your-class kind of thing. Okay, mothers stand by their sons, but you go further, behaving like a dyed-in-the-wool Rosetta Street villain when you're nothing of the sort. I suspect that when you couldn't turn Max around and make him honest, you found a way to live with it: by looking on him as a soldier instead of a crook. You wouldn't be an active accomplice, but good security is a basic of campaigning and you know all about security.

"Which leaves me with a problem." Again he waited without reward. "I haven't an inkling who physically killed your son with a single carefully placed rifle shot. Some hired marksman, another soldier. But I do know where to look for the real murderer—or two

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of them. Unless you start opening up, I may never be able to establish whether Albanini or Macksey had Max murdered or if the pair of them acted in concert to keep the haul—no cuts to anyone else—and put us off the track."

Brenda's breath sucked in sharply and she bit her lip. Mrs. Brandell's expression changed for an instant, though she never stirred. The closest WPC Diggs could define it was the memory of being a little girl at the zoo. She had stared at a lion and the animal stared through her until suddenly it was looking *at* her, and in her panic the bars seemed to melt.

Brazenly insincere, Inspector David said, "I thought I'd made that clear from the start, Max being murdered. The motorway police didn't like the accident at all—it's only in rubbishy TV thrillers that cars explode when they crash. The fire was too fierce, too soon after he skidded and hit the bank beyond the hard shoulder. So when the wreck cooled down, they and the Forensics took a look-see. The tire didn't blow, it was shot out with a rifle bullet. And the station wagon was almost certainly rigged to burn if it had a shunt or even braked hard.

"I'm not a mechanic, Mrs. Brandell, but there's something about the fuel tank being ready to break loose and the fuel lines weakened. Tire goes, wagon skids and hits the bank, tank jars free, petrol sprays all over the red-hot exhaust pipe. Forensics also believe a great deal of paper was burnt, but they doubt whether it was bank-note paper."

He spread his hands, beaming modestly. "Credit where it's due, somebody dreamed up a tasty scheme. Just four robbers and two of them were wallies, didn't count. Bags thrown into the back of the van, a little while later the hired thugs take off and *some* bags get shifted to the back-up vehicle. There's plenty of space in a Transit van, room to hide say four plastic bags stuffed with wastepaper. Maybe Billy conned Tommy, maybe it was the other way around.

"Then again, the pair of them could have connived to do Max out of his cut *and* con the police into taking it easy. Between ourselves, we do tend to be less motivated when there's no chance of getting the money back."

Mrs. Brandell moved for the first time, leaning forward to consult a cheap alarm clock sitting in the empty fireplace. "Is there much more of this? I like to hear the BBC World Service news bulletin."

Even David, who knew the lady, was nonplussed. "Albanini has made himself scarce—vanished hours before the payroll business

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was made public, which is significant. He's hiding somewhere, probably within a mile of here. Tommy Macksey's different. He's sitting back in his big house down there by Weybridge with a hundred-guineas-an-hour lawyer on tap and the best alibi money can buy, laughing at us. Laughing at you and Max, Mrs. Brandell.

"All I'm asking—we don't know who those two hired helpers were. If I can get to them, they'll send Albanini and Macksey over to save their own skins. *Then* the dog can see the rabbit, then we can start sweating Billy and Tommy and nail one or both of them for killing your son. I can't put it any clearer than that."

Mrs. Brandell cackled abruptly. "My God, you take everything so seriously. Jabber, jabber, jabber, and it's all about the crime figures and the clear-up rate and your infernal career, such as it is. Not a syllable will bring my son back." She regarded him, chin up, with infuriating pity. "I'd get out if I were you."

At the door, Brenda Diggs turned and blurted, "Look, I know what you think of us but I really am sorry about your boy." Laura Brandell, already switching on her radio, wasn't listening.

"Weird," Nick said, wiping his brow as they went downstairs. "She's cracked, but there's still this instinct to stand well with her."

He gave the policewoman such a sweet smile that her heart clenched. "I'm awfully glad you told her that. I wasn't big enough to—and she wouldn't have believed me, anyway. Well done."

They went out under the arch. "She's gone too far to come back," Nick said regretfully. "Kept her trap shut for so long that there's some kind of psychological block. Tragic. If we don't get to those hired hands pretty soon, Albanini or Macksey or the lousy pair of them will get away with it."

Laura Brandell listened to their footsteps dwindling down the stone staircase. Caution learned in a hard school, she waited—standing well back from the window—to see her visitors well away from the premises. Then she went out and walked along the corridor to Flat 131.

A radio was playing, so she didn't press the bell, leaning against the wall and rolling a needle-thin, acrid cigarette. When it was half smoked, the radio stopped in mid-bar and soon a man emerged, shying and turning his head away at sight of Mrs. Brandell before scurrying to the stairs.

He'd left the door ajar and Mrs. Brandell went straight in, calling,

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"Only me." The flat was cleaner than her own, ten times warmer, and a great deal smellier in a scented and frowsy manner. The woman who emerged from the bedroom, pulling on a gaudy home-made silk wrap, had lemon shaped breasts drooping to her navel and sad traceries of broken veins marring both pallid thighs. Smiling tiredly, she said, "Doesn't get no easier, luv," by way of greeting and sat down with a sigh and a thump.

Mrs. Brandell said, "I'm glad I was never pretty enough to make a living on my back." There was no trace of jeering or patronage in her voice. She put a tall bottle of Duty Free scotch on the table. "Small token of esteem, Vikki. I've come for my knickknacks, the souvenirs."

"No call to give me nothin' for that, luv," Vikki replied, patently pleased and touched by the gesture. She heaved up and went into the bedroom, returning with a 1930s chocolates box of the more ornate kind—a cardboard casket, lid secured by no less than four heavy rubber bands. Passing it over, she commented, "Ever so pretty, that. They don't make stuff that pretty these days."

"Too sentimental for me, but it's the right size. You shall have it this afternoon, I'm making a grand clear-out." To her relief, Vikki made no reference to her tragedy. That alone was worth a bottle of scotch.

But apparently Mrs. Brandell was more sentimental than she seemed, for on returning to 124 she drew the curtains and peeled the rubber bands away from the box with a trace of girlish eagerness. It contained neither jewelry nor love letters, however. Laura took out the Colt .45, barrel shortened and grips made chunkier by slightly perished black insulating tape. Humming under her breath, she started to strip and clean the weapon with a speed and confidence suggesting that she had done the work before.

Detective-Inspector David was shaving next morning when Superintendent Greatrex phoned. "Tommy Macksey's been killed down at Weybridge. Get over to Rosetta Street pronto, Surrey's sending a DS to pick our brains and liaise. He'll be getting there now. I'll be on your heels." It was 7:30 A.M.

Detective-Sergeant Peel from Weybridge was a small, restless fellow who talked in tabloid crime-reporter's language. The type wasn't uncommon—Nick could never be sure whether they aped the tabloids or vice-versa.

"Macksey was killed late last night or in the early hours today,"

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Peel explained. "He was asleep, some bright spark crept in and gave him one between the horns at close range, big pistol, gangland-style killing. He only lived on our patch, sir. My skipper believes there must be a connection here at your end—and the shooter, too, most likely. Macksey never put a foot wrong with us—the original wise dog that doesn't foul its own doorstep."

"And you're saying let's keep it that way," Inspector David suggested amiably. He was wondering whether Billy Albanini's prompt going to ground owed less to the payroll robbery than a settling of scores with Macksey for cheating him over it.

Sergeant Peel said, "The nearest thing we have to a witness is next to useless—scared out of her wits. Macksey's wife walked out a month or so ago and there are no kids. He got this Asian servant through an agency. We're looking for a reliable interpreter but she speaks a bit of French and from what we make out so far the girl was wakened by a loud noise some time between going to sleep at midnight and first light. The noise made her poke her head out of her bedroom door and she saw a woman in the passage. An old lady, she says, but this girl's about seventeen and everybody's old to her."

Nick said, "A strange woman of any age in the house in the middle of the night—didn't the servant think that odd? Or was the woman known to her?"

"This girl doesn't seem very bright, and she's terribly timid. But she said the woman *was* a stranger and she told the girl to go back to sleep. We've got a cab driver who answered a call from a phone kiosk a mile from Macksey's house about 2 A.M. He took a female to Chiswick and dropped her on a corner. She could have picked up a night bus to anywhere from there. The cab driver says the woman was over fifty, rather abrupt and toffee-nosed—shut him up like a bleeding telescope when he wanted to chat and pass the time. The two women might be one and the same—anything about them ring any bells with you, sir?"

Everybody took the O'Brian brothers, Donal and Peter, for twins despite their having been born a year apart. They were similar in degrees of griminess, sullen, evasive eyes, uncertain temper when drunk, and matted, curly ginger beards. They'd inherited their dad's yard at Navigation Street, a snug place with the canal on two sides and a high, corrugated iron fence topped with double strands of barbed wire facing the street. They lived there on and off, doing a

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little desultory car-breaking. Occasionally they broke faces or pub windows and went away for a while.

The best time to take people at a disadvantage is early in the morning, so when Detective-Inspector David was cursing and putting his razor aside to answer the phone, Mrs. Brandell was standing in Navigation Street, studying the yard. Even at that hour there were kids around. Presently they started catcalling and casting obscene aspersions on the intruder. One of them came right up to her and spoke vividly if nervously. Mrs. Brandell met his eye and said with utmost seriousness, "Don't be so silly, I wouldn't do that with grown men, far less children."

For some reason his spit dried and it took an effort for him to mumble, "We aren't doin' nuffin, Missus."

"Never mind that. You know the area—I bet you ten pounds you can't show me a way to slip into that yard."

Wary yet macho, the boy capered, his hand out. "You lose, you lose." He led her along the fence to where it began curving to meet the invisible bend of the canal. The rest of the pack drifted up, but he turned on them, grimacing and swearing until they fled. He didn't want to share his winnings. Mrs. Brandell had picked the leader for that reason.

He eased what had seemed a solidly fixed sheet of the corrugated iron out and then up, opening a wedge-shaped gap. When she paid, he hoped to see her purse but, by chance or design, she had the single note ready, folded small in her hand.

"Listen," he warned as she ducked through, "they got a dog."

"Chained by the gate," Mrs. Brandell acknowledged, placid though muffled, for she was no longer much good at bending double with a knee grazing one ear. "That's why it's barking, poor brute." Once inside, her face appeared again. "If you are here when I come out, there will be another tenner. All you'll get from those drunken Irishmen is a kick if you go and tell them I'm here."

The boy didn't bother to deny it. The corrugated iron was being worked shut from the other side of the fence. He sat on the curb, wondering how she had thought of it a minute before he had.

The O'Brian brothers slept, and much else besides, in a sordid camping van with bricks in place of wheels at the far end of the yard. Mrs. Brandell sat on a pile of railway ties, waiting for them to appear. The dog was making an astonishing racket now that it could glimpse her. Nobody would ignore that indefinitely.

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The first thing Mrs. Brandell did when Donal O'Brian emerged from the trailer into daylight was to shoot him where his massive right leg joined the gross torso. Behind him, Peter O'Brian's eyelids were gummy. When he saw Mrs. Brandell, he assumed, dazedly, that she was a nun. The dark clothes did it—black slacks and a matching anorak, its hood drawn over her head—and her hands that seemed to be clasped at waist level.

So they were, but not in prayer. Laura Brandell had been trained to shoot the Fairbairn and Sykes way. They were two veteran colonial policemen, authors and exemplars of Shooting To Kill with the One-Hand Gun. Their method uses both hands, elbows braced against the ribs, pistol held with the barrel parallel with the ground. Turret firing, it's called: at close quarters, providing your shoulders are square to the target, you hit it.

She shot Donal because he had emerged first. He had grunted and half sat down without meaning to before his mind caught up with the pain and he screamed and then slumped, his massively shocked central nervous system shutting down all needless activity. Mrs. Brandell's main reaction was that the web of her thumb hurt from the bucking of the Colt.

Peter O'Brian waited frozen. His cheeks were the color of clay. "Pay attention," she said. "I shot him before I asked the question. If you do not answer or if you try to lie, I will shoot you. He isn't dead, but you will be, by God you will."

The horizontal O'Brian squalled, "Yer crazy!"

"All the more reason for doing as I say," Mrs. Brandell retorted drily. "Billy Albanini, where is he?" Peter O'Brian's beard became agitated as he chewed his lip. "You know where he is, don't pretend otherwise. Quick now!"

She pulled the butt of the Colt tighter and Peter O'Brian emitted a sound she recalled from rough emergency surgery in the field—that breathy whimper of protest. It assured her that O'Brian wouldn't lie. He said, "Leave me alone, swear you will, and I'll—"

Behind her, cinders crunched.

Brenda Diggs was on foot patrol a hundred yards away when the sharp yet minor explosion made her pause and frown. Backfire, nail-firing gun on that building site, what? It might even have been a gunshot on radio or breakfast TV—she'd been fooled by that before.

She walked on, heading for Navigation Street, dismissing the riddle. Somebody had parked here with two wheels on the sidewalk.

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There was no doubt about that and she could do something about it.

A second report made her forget the parking offense. Brenda did a lot of skeet-shooting in her spare time and she recognized a shotgun when she heard it. A shotgun and—echo off a building perhaps—something sharper and more authoritative within the larger sound.

She started jogging toward the scrapyard, where the gunshot seemed to have originated. A black youth came tearing toward her, shouting for help, and she used her radio to call assistance—a firearm had been discharged, there was an emergency of some sort, she'd be back in short order.

"They kill the old lady, them bastards," the youth yelled, tugging at her.

It could be a trap. "Keep back," Brenda ordered him tersely, sharp through dread. The scrapyard gate was locked from inside, with a dog yammering frenziedly, making the corrugated iron shudder with its assaults.

Protesting tires and the slam of a door made her spin round. Nick David said, "Caught your message! What's happening?"

"Two shots, possibly three, from in there. One a shotgun. I can't get in, and there's a dog."

The black youth, dancing with impatience, said, "You get in down here—same as the old party did."

David stiffened, though his grin was masterly. "Know her, do you, son?"

"Nuh, but she all right—"

Brenda and Nick raced after him.

In the yard, Laura Brandell watched Peter O'Brian dive into the canal and strike out toward Eton Street on the far side. She decided vaguely that the days were drawing in. Strange that it should be getting dark so early. She felt delightfully warm and relaxed, though.

She'd become rusty—one was bound to over four decades. If this had been a SOE test, she would have failed it and lost the chance to fight in France. An amateur's mistake, failing to establish that the camping van had *two* doors, one on its blind side.

Her first shot had alerted the man skulking inside and so the next—a double discharge, in fact—came from him. But he'd failed the test as well, not looking where he trod while creeping up. She

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had whirled in time to put a bullet where it counted, while receiving both barrels at once.

She ought not to be alive, except that a sawn-off was unchoked, making its loads spread far and fast, and she had been a crucial yard farther away than he'd wanted. Without regret, she told herself that she had forfeited much chance of survival by dragging herself over to the shotgunner's corpse and finding his wallet to confirm his identity. It didn't surprise her, but the satisfaction was intense.

When Brenda reached her and knelt beside her, ruining a nearly new uniform by cradling the woman's head, most of Laura Brandell's upper body was wetly tattered ruin and blood was pooling around her hips.

Nick said, "How did you know it was Macksey who killed your son—did you find the money?"

Mrs. Brandell said, "You don't understand," raised herself on an elbow, and pointed to the man with the shotgun lying hidden in the weeds. Except that she hadn't actually spoken and remained motionless. The discovery saddened rather than frightened her.

When next she spoke, she whispered, "Mummy," and WPC Diggs answered instantly, "Yes, darling, lie still."

"Only sure way," breathed Mrs. Brandell, going away forever. Nick had just found Donal O'Brian unconscious by the camper. Soon he would find the shotgunner and understand her parting words.

Unable to tell whether Thomas Macksey or William Albanini was behind her son's death or whether they'd been accomplices, she had taken the pragmatic course and killed the pair of them.

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"Access Violation" is Roger Gallagher's first professionally published fiction. In the late 'forties he was a free-lance radio writer, with some of his dramas broadcast nationally on such network programs as "Grand Central Station," "Skippy Hollywood Theater," and "Stars over Hollywood." For the past twenty years he has been a copy editor and sometime writer for the Morning Union *in Springfield, Massachusetts.*

And so enter his police reporter, George Allen, who proves yet again that news reporting is like police work—it's the slogging that does it every time . . .

ACCESS VIOLATION

by ROGER GALLAGHER

I was on cops the night Seltzer bought the ranch. That in itself was a vast trick of Fate, because he was the regular police reporter, and the only reason I was doing cops instead of general assignments was that he had the night off.

Nobody likes to fill in for the police reporter. You don't know anyone at the cop shop very well, they don't know you, and they won't open up to you the way they would to him. That makes getting information sort of like pulling teeth and writing a decent story next to impossible.

The traffic roundup I was working on was putting me to sleep and the staccato hissing and crackling of the portable scanner on my desk kept breaking what little concentration I could muster, so I took a hike to the vending room and patronized the coffee machine, which took my money and kept the change. It did give me the coffee, though.

On the way back to my desk I passed our newest journalism intern, staring blankly at a bright-green computer-terminal screen on

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which, in the upper left corner, white letters spelled out TERMINAL READY, REQUEST SIGN-ON.

Some people like to turn the brightness and contrast way up like that, but I prefer the softer tones, with green letters on a black screen. Turning away from the glare, my eyes met his, in which I could hardly miss the appeal for help.

"Problem?"

He nodded. "Forgot how to sign on."

Typical, I thought. They get worse every year.

"Hit S for sign-on," I said. He did. "Now hit SEND." He did, and the sign-on format appeared on the screen like a blank form. "Now, see where it says USER ID? That's you. Type your initials and the last three digits of your Social Security number in there."

He typed six key strokes and the cursor moved along the line, but nothing appeared on the screen. "It ain't typing," he mumbled morosely. "The ribbon must be broke."

The ribbon. On a computer. Ah, well. "It's not supposed to appear," I explained patiently. "That's your own, personal, secret access code—nobody else is supposed to know it or even see it. That's why this ingenious machine helps you type it invisibly, so that I, looking over your shoulder, can't steal it and use it later to break into your desk."

"Desk?"

I groaned. "Not desk as in furniture, desk as in computer storage area. That's what we call the places where stuff is kept. You have your own desk, I have mine. We write our stories in our own desks. Then we send them to City 2. That's the desk the city editor uses. When he types City 2 and hits SEND, he gets a directory of all the stories his staff has been sending to him. Then he can pick any story and call it up on the screen to read it. Now hit SEND again."

The format disappeared, a moment passed, and the new message read: SIGN-ON ACCEPTED.

"You're in business," I said and returned to my desk. As in furniture.

I was just getting back into the stultifying traffic roundup when my scanner crackled and the police dispatcher's voice said, "Car Four, proceed to Laura Lane for a Code One."

Code One—Man Down—could be anything, a drunk in the gutter, a heart attack. Under normal circumstances I wouldn't even look up from a crossword puzzle for that unless there was a further com-

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munication—I'd be heading for the cop shop in an hour or so anyway and could find out then what it was about.

But these were not normal circumstances. In the first place, anything that could take me away from that traffic roundup was worth my attention. In the second place, Laura Lane was a dirty, garbage-strewn, dead-end alley in the sleaziest section of town, and a Code One down there could turn out to be interesting.

I looked over at City Desk. Wild Bill McKindling met my gaze and raised a jaded eyebrow. "Code One in Laura Lane," I said hopefully. He shrugged, glanced at the clock, considered, then jerked his thumb at the door. Grabbing my scanner and walkie-talkie, I dashed out to the parking lot, cranked up the Honda, and hit the road.

The cruiser was already there when I turned into Laura Lane, its revolving blue-and-red lights creating a disco ambience in the fetid alley. The two cops, strangers to me, were just getting out to investigate the figure of a man lying face down close to the west wall, with his right arm extended slightly, fingers resting against the wall.

The cops turned and I held up my press card.

"Allen, *Morning Blade,*" I said. They didn't even acknowledge me, but they didn't turn me away, either. They knew that media people monitored their calls and were used to having us turn up at the scene right on their heels. They didn't like it much, but they had public-relations policies and the First Amendment to live with and there wasn't too much they could do about it, so mostly they played live and let live.

As we approached the downed man, I noticed, first of all, that he wasn't all that badly dressed—khaki pants, tweed jacket, penny loafers. As one of the cops rolled him over, I saw a pale-blue sport shirt, then the bloodstains, and then, God help me, his face. It was, as his byline always said, David E. Seltzer, Police Reporter. My colleague, Bromo—the guy whose regular job I was doing at that very moment. His eyes stared sightlessly up into our faces.

"This guy's been shot," one cop said, dropping to his knees to explore for a pulse. The other one sprang toward the cruiser to request an ambulance. "He's gone," the first cop said, but the ambulance would come anyway. You never know. As Yogi Berra once said, "It's not over until it's over."

Remembering suddenly who I was and what I was supposed to be doing, I ran to the Honda and used my walkie-talkie.

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"Unit Five to City Desk."

"Go ahead, Unit Five."

"Bill, it's Bromo."

"What?"

"It's Bromo. The Code One in Laura Lane is Dave Seltzer. He's been shot. I'm pretty sure he's dead."

"Oh, my God." Wild Bill sounded devastated. I remembered belatedly that he and Bromo were drinking buddies. In the long pause while he, I assumed, was getting hold of himself, I realized I was shaking.

"Stay with it," Bill said finally. "Frankie's on his way. Forget your deadline. Just get the story."

"Sure, Bill," I said, and signed off. Frankie Flanagan, ace photographer, would have heard our conversation on his two-way radio and come flying out of the photo lab like a bullet. I went back to where the two cops, unable to do anything for Bromo—who they knew, of course—were examining the wall under the cruiser's headlights.

I hadn't noticed it before, but now I saw that Dave, using his own blood, had obviously tried to write something on the wall before he died.

"That says D-E-S," one of the cops said. "That's it. D-E-S."

"Those are his initials," the other one said, surprise in his voice. "David E. Seltzer. Why in hell would he write his initials at a time like that?"

"Maybe a dramatic dying gesture," the first cop suggested. "You know—here lies David E. Seltzer, over and out."

These guys were getting to me. "Don't be ridiculous," I snapped. "He was trying to tell us something. It's just a coincidence that the first three letters of his killer's name, or whatever he tried to write, are the same as his initials."

They both rose and turned toward me resentfully when Frankie's jeep lurched into the alley on screeching tires and we all got down to work.

Back in the newsroom later, I sat down across from Wild Bill, who looked awful. The police had already been there to talk to people and they'd asked for Bromo's notebooks, but of course there were none. Ever since the courts had ruled that reporters' notes could be subpoenaed, most reporters I knew didn't keep any—not so you'd notice it, at least.

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"The police had a 911 call at 11:38 from some unidentified wino who saw Dave on his back in the alley but didn't touch him," I told McKindling. "Officers Ginko and Tremayne responded in Car Four. I got there on their tail. He was dead—the medical examiner confirmed that at the scene. He was shot four times at close range with a .22. We won't know the time of death until after the autopsy later today. Nothing on him but the usual stuff—wallet, keys, change—no notes or anything. At this hour, the cops are going over his apartment for leads and looking for his car, which isn't in his parking slot. It wasn't at the scene, either. Later today they'll scour Laura Lane and canvass the area to see if anyone heard the shots."

Bill just sat there, nodding sadly. I told him about the writing on the wall, but it didn't suggest anything to him.

Something occurred to me. "What's Dave's desk?" I asked.

"Bromo," Bill said. Of course, what else?

I got up, nudged him aside, and typed on his keyboard D (for desk) *space Bromo* SEND.

ACCESS VIOLATION, the terminal growled at me. Naturally. That's what the secret sign-ons were for: so people couldn't get into each other's desks.

Bill scowled. "Why did you do that? You know you can't just call up somebody else's desk."

I shrugged. "Sometimes the system plays little tricks. I thought it was worth a shot."

There was a pause. Then Bill said, "A .22, huh? Well, trust me, nobody heard the shots. There was a silencer on the gun."

I was stunned. "How can you know that?"

He stared into my eyes. "It was an execution, George—a gangland execution. Bromo was onto something and those bastards put him away. It was your standard, routine hit—with a silenced .22, like always."

"But he wasn't shot in the back of the head. They were all in the chest. I thought hit men always used two shots in the back of the head."

Wild Bill shrugged. "Maybe they couldn't get behind him. Maybe that method's reserved for insiders."

I paced. "What the hell was he doing down there, dressed like that—and where's his car? He wouldn't go to the nearest corner without his car."

"They'll find his car tomorrow—I mean today—wherever he left it when he got into their car. They drove him to Laura Lane, wasted

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him, and pushed him out. Go write your story. I can't hold the press much longer."

I put my face close to his. "Do you know enough about this to do any good?"

His head moved slowly from side to side. "I know he was working on something potentially very big, but he wouldn't tell me what it was. You know how he was, he played everything close to his chest. I think it was something linking the mob with city government but don't quote me. —Come on, George, I need that story."

I returned to my desk and knocked out the story, thinking how ironic it was that the hottest crime story we'd had in years would appear under my byline instead of Bromo's because he was the star of the show. So far. When I'd sent the story to City 2, I asked Wild Bill if I could do Bromo's obit. We had one on file, but it would be updated and embellished and I wanted to do that. Bill was only too willing—he couldn't bear to do it himself.

I pulled a printout of the obit on file and started weaving it into a real eulogy for one of the better newsmen I'd worked with over the years. I was just hitting my stride when my terminal beeped and a message appeared: SYSTEM GOING DOWN IN FIVE MINUTES.

"Damn!" I muttered. They were always doing that—purging the system of unwanted material just when I was working on something. I looked at the clock. It was 3:00 A.M. Wild Bill was long gone and so was everyone else except the purgers and the cleaning crew. I went to the food machines to get something to eat. When I got back, it was TERMINAL READY FOR SIGN-ON. I called up the format and typed in my invisible access code: GBA941. Just as I hit SEND, it hit me! David E. Seltzer—DES what? That's what he had tried to write on the wall—something no one else, not even Wild Bill, would know: his sign-on, his access code. His initials were the first half of it, the rest would be the last three digits of his Social Security number.

Now where in the hell was I going to get that at 3:00 o'clock in the morning?

As if by Divine Providence my roving eye fell on the head man of the cleaning crew reading somebody's correspondence across the newsroom. Knowing he had keys to the various offices so his guys could get in there and clean, I walked over and told him I needed to know what awards and decorations Bromo had acquired as a Vietnam veteran. He had heard about Bromo's murder, hadn't he?

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Hell, yes, he said, he hadn't heard much of anything else since he got there.

"I need it for his obit," I said. "To say he was an Army veteran of the Vietnam War and what his decorations are. So I'd appreciate if you'd open the personnel office for me so I can get that information out of his records." His ribbons were already listed in his canned obit, of course, but the guy bought it and within a few minutes I had Bromo's Social Security number.

Back at my desk, I signed off, called up the sign-on format again, and typed in DES727. Then I hit SEND.

Nothing happened.

It took a minute or so for the significance of that to sink in. We all used the same formula for our access codes—three initials and the last three digits of our Social Security numbers—but obviously Bromo had not. That was just like him. I could almost hear him saying, "Hey, any fool can find out my SS number without too much trouble—what do I look like, a dork?" So of course he'd used some other mysterious combination.

And as the life drained out of him he'd tried desperately to give us his sign-on, known only to himself. So there must be something in his desk that would help. I had to break in.

It was 3:40 A.M. when I started. DES000. DES001. DES002. DES003—

Sometime after dawn, the evening-paper staff started drifting in. Ralph Orbet, their guy on cops, was surprised to see me still there. Since he usually used my desk and terminal, he had to find somewhere else to sit.

"I stopped by the cop shop on the way in," he said. "They found Bromo's car in the parking lot of the Paradise Lounge."

"Isn't that joint owned by Anthony Argentino—Fat Lip, the guy who runs those gambling junkets to Atlantic City?" I asked him.

"Right. The bartender who was on duty told the cops Bromo waited there for someone he was supposed to meet. He saw him get into a white Cadillac and drive away. But what good is that? There must be a hundred white Caddies in this town, and who knows if it was even this town? The barkeep didn't see the license plates."

DES471. DES472. DES473. "What time was that? When Bromo left in the Caddie?"

Ralph consulted his notes. "Let's see—somewhere between ten and ten-thirty, the bartender says."

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DES486, DES487, DES488. "Did he see the driver?"

"Yeah, but he didn't recognize him. He gave the cops a pretty vague description. Still, he seems to think he'd know the guy if he saw him again."

I lost all track of time, just kept punching up numbers and getting pretty punchy myself.

DES521, DES522, DES523. The morning wore on. DES764, DES765 . . . Bingo! There it was! I was signed on in Bromo's desk, I'd succeeded in violating his access!

Scrolling quickly through the directory, I found items going back for weeks. There was nothing to do but start at the top and read.

Within the next hour, I read every word, every note, every story David E. Seltzer, Police Reporter, had written in the past month and there wasn't a line of anything even remotely significant so far as I could tell. There was one cryptic entry, MUFTI PARATEN, that might have meant something, but it made no sense to me. Exhausted and dejected, I pulled a printout of the entire contents of the Bromo desk and dropped it off at the cop shop on my way home. There I treated myself to two large belts of tequila and hit the sack.

I was supposed to be off for the next two days, but when I woke a few hours later I realized that, since Bromo wouldn't be coming to work, Wild Bill would be down one man and might have no one to put on cops. I called and asked him if he wanted me to come in on overtime. "That would be nice," he said.

I went directly to the newsroom. For one thing, I wanted to read the late city edition of the evening paper to bring myself up to date. They didn't have much—just the bit about the car and how the cops were checking out some leads. The cops would say that anyway.

I got out my scanner and walkie-talkie and told Wild Bill I was on my way to the cop shop for my first contact of the night. He'd been looking at me funny ever since I'd arrived, and now the look got even funnier. "George," he said stiffly, "we have a very unusual situation here today. You don't have to go to the cop shop. Just this one time, the cop shop has come to you."

I shook my head. "Say again?"

Bill rose, beckoned me to follow, and strolled across the room to the glass-enclosed conference room where the editors held their nightly news-budget meetings. As we approached, I saw that Lieutenant Foster Peters, the only cop I knew even slightly and the man

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in charge of the Seltzer case, was inside. He rose as we entered and held out his hand. "Nice going, Allen," he said. "You know, what you did was in the finest traditions of police work, and you're not even a regular police reporter, much less a cop. It's the slogging that does it every time."

"What are you talking about?" I let him pump my hand.

Peters, who stood about six-four, put one foot on the chair, and laid it on me. "You're the guy who slogged through all those numbers until you hit the right one and got into Seltzer's desk. And you're the one who called our attention to that entry, Mufti Paraten." aten."

"You got something out of that?"

"We did indeed, George. We cranked it into our computer, which as you know is part of a national hookup, and whaddaya know, we came up with a hit man in Jersey City named Alfonso 'Mufti' Ravenna. The Jersey guys did some fast checking and found a white Cadillac that was rented early yesterday to a bozo matching Mufti's description. It had just been returned. By now they probably have a positive I.D. on him from the rental agency, and I expect we'll get the same from the barkeep at the Paradise Lounge."

"They have him in custody?"

"Right. He hardly got his coat off before they were at his door. There was blood in the back seat of the car, which we expect will match up with Bromo's, and threads from a tweed jacket, and fingerprints on some of the chrome fixtures."

I sat down. "But how does it all connect up? What's with the Paraten?"

"My guess," said Peters, "would be that it's Bromo's shorthand for a date he had to meet Mufti at the Paradise Lounge at ten o'clock. Incidentally, we also located some people who saw a white Cadillac—with Jersey plates yet—enter and leave Laura Lane sometime between ten-thirty and eleven.

"But the best part, y'see, is that Mufti's just a hit man sent up here by the Mob to silence our mutual friend. We've got hold of him where it hurts and the plea bargaining should begin any minute now. To get a break on a murder rap, he'll sing his bloody head off. We'll get the locals who put out the contract and they in turn will finger their local politicos and Bromo will have accomplished his mission, after all. What he was trying to expose will come to light."

I looked at Wild Bill and he looked at me.

"Better get on the story," he said. "We've got an early deadline."

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In reference to this story, which makes skillful use of cats as metaphor, Elizabeth Burgamy wrote us: "I am fond of cats myself. I wrote this in a silly mood after buying a kitten for my nine-year-old son George. Sadly, the kitten became ill and died a week later. I will celebrate the publication of my first short story, 'No Lover of Cats,' by adopting one."

Mrs. Burgamy was born in upstate New York and spent her childhood in Canada, Wisconsin, Okinawa, and Florida—her father was in the Air Force—before settling in Atlanta, Georgia, twenty years ago. She now lives in a suburb with her husband and son, but they miss the city and go into town frequently . . .

NO LOVER OF CATS

by ELIZABETH W. BURGAMY

The cats are everywhere. A lean grey one with light eyes is licking its paws on the mantel. A small black kitten lies on the sofa arm under the circle of light from the lamp, stretching its neck to scratch an ear on the shade. The rest of the litter bat a rubber mouse on a string my wife tied to the stair. I slap my briefcase down on the desk with a vengeance and a sleeping calico jumps out of its skin. I think it's the one that pounces on me from the closet every morning. I go into the kitchen and an enormous orange blob blinks from the top of the refrigerator as I get my beer. They're all watching me like spies.

My wife is sitting at the table drinking herb tea and licking sunflower seeds from her palm. She's actually dressed.

"What's the occasion?" I ask, kissing the air near her cheek.

It occurs to me that Alice is beginning to look like one of the cats herself. I was first drawn to her curves—her wavy lips and voluptuous body. But her curves have spread and settled and her eyes

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have grown sleepy. She sits there very still, humming—as though purring to herself. Only her hand and her mouth move as she eats and drinks.

Finally, the seemingly lidless eyes widen a fraction and the pale irises roll slowly in my direction.

"Mother has her leg cramps again. I'm going over," she says, licking a seed from her lip.

"What about the cats?" I hear myself ask in alarm. "The kitten that has to be force-fed? Doesn't your mother have any neighbors?"

"You can do it," comes her monotone. "The syringe is in the sink. There's a jar of baby food in the fridge." Her chubby hand closes over her car keys.

Suddenly the thought of forcing the syringe in the kitten's mouth and squirting the cold slimy stuff down its throat appeals to me. I give in and start gathering a few snacks to hold Alice on the thirty-minute drive.

Then another thought occurs to me.

"What about my dinner?"

She just gives me that pale stare and doesn't answer. She takes the bag of food from me, picks up her coat and suitcase, and walks out.

"Alice!" I say.

She gets in the car and drives off. The command "Don't forget to clean Wuzzy's ear!" cuts back to me in the twilight.

I stand there angrily until she's out of sight. Then, shaking with excitement, I go back in and dial the phone.

"Hi, Baby," I say. "The old cow's gone for the night. Mother's sick again. Come over. Come now."

Connie Birch isn't curvy. She's tall and thin, her hair is straight. Her nose and mouth are straight. She's my idea of sexy—she'll never be fat.

"I don't know. The cats. I'm allergic. And the smell. Couldn't we go to a nice restaurant? Or at least you come over here."

"I can't. She'll call. She always does, you know that. We'll go upstairs to my study. I don't let the cats in there. We'll shut the door, play some music."

"I don't know, Harry." It's starting to sound final.

"It won't be like last time, I promise you. The cat's not sick any more. I cleaned the carpet myself. And like I say, they never go in the study."

"What can we do in the study?"

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"Get some rug burns, Doll." I laugh raunchily. "It'll be great. Remember that time in the office—"

"Harry!"

"Pick us up some Jack Daniels and I'll pay you back." I hang up the phone. She'll come. I'm no fool. Her last husband was a prissy guy, an accountant. What she wants now is crude. So I give her crude. Right now, I'm her idea of sexy.

Suddenly something black whips through the air in front of me. I jump back as silver objects fly with a deafening clatter. A kitten emerges from the disorder and scampers off. It had been hiding behind the cannisters.

Shakily, I pick up the mess, wipe off a couple of glasses, and take them to the study along with some pillows, then I kick out the cats. Literally.

When she arrives I take her immediately up to the study, relieving her of a blue dress and silky white camisole along the way. On the way up, I think I see a shadow slink through the crack beside the exhaust fan, but I'm too absorbed with Connie to care. It isn't entirely my macho act. The small straight lines of her body turned me on at once.

Just as things begin to get steamy, she sneezes.

I look up. The sinister light eyes of the grey cat are watching from the top of the bookshelves.

"Oh, God," I say.

Before I can get to my feet, it jumps down and runs out. I forgot to close the door.

I'm chilled. It was as if my wife was watching me make love to Connie.

We calm down with a drink and lean back on the cushions, sipping and listening to jazz on the radio. A breeze drifts through the open windows. I begin to feel mellow and content. Connie turns and starts to rub my shoulders.

"Why don't you—" she begins softly.

"Aw, Baby, don't bring that up."

"She'll never give you the money, Harry."

"I'll think of a way. I'm working on it."

"Do you think she doesn't know what you're up to? She's gonna keep the money in the bank all your life, like the mouse on a string, to keep you with her."

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"No, no, you're wrong, Sugar. You should trust me more. Anyway, it's not so bad like this, is it?" I rub her flat stomach and feel her begin to relax again.

Suddenly a cat jumps out of the billowing curtain. Connie screams. I grab the cat and throw it back out the window.

"I can't take it any more!" Connie cries, dressing rapidly. She forgets to put on her camisole so she wads it up and stuffs it into her purse. Then she whips out a tissue. "Don't you understand? The cats are driving me crazy!"

She runs downstairs, sneezing.

I dial her number for hours, with breaks in between in case Alice calls. Connie doesn't answer and Alice doesn't call. Downstairs now, I drink some more whiskey and wander.

At midnight the front door bursts open and Alice walks in, surrounded by her cats. She is mad.

"What is the sick kitten doing out in the cold? And all the rest of my babies? What have you been doing in here?"

The dark-grey cat jumps comfortably onto her shoulder and purrs in her ear, telling secrets.

Without waiting for an answer from me, Alice goes upstairs and into my study.

I remembered to put back the pillows and wash Connie's glass but I'm suddenly afraid, even when I follow her and see no trace of Connie's visit. Why did Alice come back? How did she know about the study? I look around at the army of cats that invaded my sanctuary with her.

"Why are you bringing them in here?" I am angry in my fear. "And why did you come back, anyway? I thought your mother was sick."

The great bulk of her back slowly moves until she faces me. Her staring eyes look through me as if I'm not there, but seeing everything. She sets a white kitten she was holding down on the rug and straightens, watching.

I look down. The kitten runs behind my chair and almost immediately a wad of something rolls out, the kitten bounding after it.

Alice bends again, picks it up, and untangles it gingerly with her fat fingers.

It is Connie's tiny camisole.

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Alice smiles in victory. It is an awful thing to see.

"Now, Harry," she says slowly, her eyes flashing like a knife, "you're going to tell me who she is."

No one would have known it wasn't an accident if I hadn't told them. A woman of her size slipping on those stairs didn't have much chance of stopping herself.

That's why I'm in this cell. It's okay with me. In fact, I planned it this way. The cell is clean and I have my books. There is no hair on my clothes. And no little eyes watch me in the night. At last I am safe from the cats.

DETECTIVERSE

CIRCUMVENTION

by DELORES MOCHULSKI

The young man declared his intention
To get rich from his great new invention,
But he'd stolen the plan
From another young man
And we now find him held in detention.

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a *NEW* Michael Vlado story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

"You are a Gypsy," Josef Patronne said.

"I am," Michael conceded. "Your brother back in Gravita worries about you. What is this wizard business? You are a Gypsy, not a wizard."

"Cannot a man be both?" Patronne asked . . .

THE GYPSY WIZARD

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Michael Vlado had traveled some seven hundred miles across southern Europe to reach Milan, having left his wife and Captain Segar and the people of Gravita with only a few days' warning of his impending journey. Crossing from Romania to the west was not an easy task, even for a Gypsy. He'd gone by way of Yugoslavia rather than Hungary because the border crossing was a bit easier. Perched between east and west, the Slavs asked fewer questions and their gates were open to wanderers.

The few who questioned him along the way saw nothing unusual in a Gypsy like Michael traveling to Milan. After all, Gypsies were born to move about. He felt no obligation to correct their false impression. The Gypsies of Michael's tribe traveled little, content to farm the land and breed horses in the Romanian hills, as they had for a hundred years.

But Josef Patronne was different. He'd left the region of the Carpathian Mountains in his youth to settle in northern Italy shortly after the end of the war. And become a wizard.

Michael found him at a table in a little outdoor cafe near the Galleria Vittoria Emanuele. He was easily recognizable with his bristling black moustache and the gold chains and rings he wore.

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When Michael joined him at the table, he said simply, "You are a Gyspy."

"I am," Michael conceded, taking a seat without being asked. "Your brother back in Gravita asked me to come find you. He saw your picture in the newspaper. Fifty Wizards Kept from the Pope, the headline said, and one of them was you."

"That was last month," Josef Patronne said with a wave of his hand, as if it had been a lifetime ago. "We went to Rome, but the Swiss Guards kept us from seeing the Pope."

"Your brother worries about you. What is wizard business? You are a Gypsy, not a wizard."

"Cannot a man be both?" Patronne finished his glass of wine and said, "Tell me your name."

"I am Michael Vlado. I lead your brother's people in Gravita."

"You are too young to be a Gypsy king."

"The old king is crippled and unable to rule. I do the job."

"And they have sent you to find me? What for? To return me to Gravita after forty years?"

"Your brother is worried. The newspaper article said you lived here in Milan and claimed to have the power to fly unaided."

Josef Patronne smiled for the first time, almost like a schoolboy taking special pride in some accomplishment. "He is worried that I will fall?"

"He is worried that you delude yourself, Josef."

A slender man of about Josef's age suddenly joined them at the table, pulling up a chair and extending a hand to Michael. "I am Axel Tortero, a friend of Josef's. Go on talking, you two. I only want a cup of espresso."

"Axel is also a wizard," Josef explained, "but not a Gypsy. He was with us in Rome. Axel, this is Michael Vlado, from Romania."

"I'm an herbalist," the newcomer explained. "I don't fly like my friend Josef."

"Forget the flying," Michael said, feeling that somehow he had stepped into another world. "Why were you in Rome?"

"Ah!" Axel Tortero held up a finger. "We wanted to see the Pope at his weekly audience. We wanted him to acknowledge that the occult sciences are compatible with Christianity. You know, a Pope in the Sixteenth Century once described this area of northern Italy as a hotbed of witchcraft, and many still believe it to be so. Certainly there are superstitions here—"

"And wizards."

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"And wizards. But they are everywhere. If a priest heals a sick man, it is a miracle. If a wizard does the same thing, it is superstition."

"We are poor, ignorant people back in Gravita," Michael tried to explain. "When we read of someone who can fly through the air, we do not think of miracles or superstition. We think the person is merely sick in the head. That is why your brother asked me to come here, Josef."

The black-haired man hit the table with his fist. "Henrik always worried too much about me, even when we were children. Go back and tell him I'm all right. Tell him I really can fly."

"Where do you do your flying?" Michael asked.

"Next I will try the huge Galleria across the square. Have you been there yet?"

"No."

"Come, then—Axel and I will show it to you."

Milan's main square itself was a magnificent open space, dominated by a vast cathedral built entirely of pearly white marble. "It took forty architects four centuries to complete it," Axel said as they passed it. "There is not another cathedral like it in all of Europe."

"It's quite impressive," Michael admitted, though he'd seen few cathedrals in Europe or anywhere else.

"They have always built big in Milan. It is Italy's commercial center and second-largest city. For a decade in the 'sixties, the thirty-two-storey Pirelli Tower was the tallest office building in Europe."

They crossed the square and entered the Galleria Vittoria Emanuele. It was a huge place with intricate mosiac floors and a curved glass roof some sixty or seventy feet above their heads. There were shops and cafes along the main floor, many with green awnings covering tables and concessions to lend an outdoor appearance to the sunlit activities. The Galleria was open to the surrounding streets and the square through its four roof-high entrances, and Michael could see a confused bird or two flapping their wings against the vaulted glass ceiling.

"Here is where I will fly," Patronne said. "The Galleria's architect, Giuseppe Mongoni, fell to his death from the glass roof just days before the opening in 1878. Perhaps he was trying to fly, too."

His friend Axel, who might have been a booster of the Milan Chamber of Commerce, continued, "It is still the largest shopping arcade in Italy."

Michael stared up at the three floors of windows above the shops

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and at the wrought-iron balcony that circled the arcade at the third level. "What's up there?" he asked. "More shops?"

"And offices. Some places have been here since before the war."

A burly man smoking a thin cigar approached them. "No Gypsies or peddlers allowed here," he announced. "Keep moving."

Josef Patronne's face brightened. "My old friend Inspector Storia! You think we are shoplifters, perhaps?"

"I don't care what you are. Just keep moving."

"Inspector, this is Michael Vlado, come to visit me from my home in Romania."

"Another Gypsy," the detective grumbled. He took another puff on his cigar.

The detective's presence seemed to disturb Axel more than Josef. He tugged at his friend's coat, saying, "We must be going, Josef. You will fly another day. It is nearly time for your class."

Inspector Storia caught this last exchange. "I have had more complaints about you from the mothers, Patronne. What you teach their children has nothing to do with reading and writing. Be careful or you will have to fly from a prison cell."

"I teach religion."

"You teach the black arts. Three hundred years ago you would have been put to death by the Inquisition."

"Then it is good that I live in the Twentieth Century," Patronne replied with a trace of a smile.

He and Axel moved on, not waiting for Michael, and it seemed that his seven-hundred-mile journey was at an end. He turned back to the inspector. "I'm sorry you scared them away. I came here to see Josef Patronne."

"You saw him. Now be on your way, Gypsy."

Crowds of shoppers and strollers were moving all about them, but Michael barely noticed. He'd rarely encountered such an open hatred directed toward him because he was a Gypsy. It was a new experience, and an unpleasant one. "I have traveled far on my mission. I would like your help."

The inspector paused, eyeing him critically. "Say what you have to."

"Josef's brother read about his visit to Rome to see the Pope."

Storia laughed—a short sharp noise that was hardly amused. "Foolish people, thinking the Pope would see them, much less condone what they were doing."

"What *do* wizards do?"

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"In their more harmless moments they practice faith healing and herbalism. At other times they've been known to act as the high priest for a coven of witches."

"And witches fly on broomsticks."

"No one flies, Mr. Vlado, except in airplanes. Medieval witches who confessed to flying were probably high on some early version of opium or belladonna."

"Then you don't believe Josef's claims?"

"I don't believe him, but I fear there are a great many children who might. That is why the man is a menace. Stay away from him. Go back where you came from."

"I must see him once more," Michael decided. "I must have something more positive to tell his brother."

"Talk to the women. Find Elsa Mancini and Ida Fileno. Ask them what they think of your friend."

"Where do I find them?"

"Ida is a nurse at Children's Hospital. Elsa would be at home with her children. There are others as well."

Michael nodded. "Thank you."

As he left the Galleria, he saw Inspector Storia standing in its very center, staring up at the glass-enclosed sky.

Elsa Mancini lived in a middle-class block of apartments not far from Sempione Park near the center of the city. She was a handsome, shapely woman in her mid-thirties and her first reaction to Michael's visit was one of apprehension. "My husband is not at home. I do not allow visitors or salesmen inside."

"Then we'll talk at the door," Michael answered agreeably. "It's about Josef Patronne. His brother—"

"Patronne, the wizard! He should be in jail!"

"His brother is worried about him. He believes he may have mental problems. He talks of flying—"

"Always the flying! And he tells this to my son! Already one boy has tried to fly and broke his leg."

"I'm sorry about that."

"Are you a relative? Do you have any control over him?"

"No, I only come at the wish of his brother."

"Take him away. Take him out of here."

"I'm afraid I can't do that."

"Then we have nothing more to talk about."

Michael tried to catch the door but she closed it in his face.

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He thought about going to the hospital next, to talk with Ida Fileno, but decided that could wait until tomorrow. Instead he had an early dinner and then tried to locate Axel Tortero. But Josef's friend had vanished from his neighborhood, at least for that night. Perhaps they were together somewhere.

Michael had taken a room at a low-cost tourist hotel on the Via Tunisia. It was there Inspector Storia found him shortly after midnight. "Get up and get dressed," he shouted through the closed door.

"What is it?"

"Your friend Patronne tried to fly tonight at the Galleria. He's dead."

Michael Vlado had barely known the man in life, yet he was sorry to see him dead, crumpled and broken on the mosaic tile floor, his blood making a pattern of its own. He lay near one of the green awnings, but not quite close enough that it could have broken his fall.

"A security guard found him shortly before midnight," Storia told Michael. "The Galleria has no doors, as you can see, but those gates limit access at night. Still, it would have been quite easy for him to get in and reach the upper floors. It looks as if he dove off the balcony up there or else one of the windows above it."

Michael shook his head sadly. "He couldn't fly after all."

There was a commotion at the nearest gate and they saw Axel Tortero bearing down on them. "Let him through," Storia called out to his men.

When Axel saw Josef, he was beside himself with grief at the death of his friend. "The fool, the stupid fool! Those women put him up to this. He wanted to fly, to be some sort of real wizard."

"Did he tell you he was coming here?" Storia asked.

"Not tonight, no. But he'd told me many times that he wanted to fly here soon."

The detective nodded. "And where were you this evening, Axel?"

"Where? At the cafe, where I always am."

"All evening?"

"I strolled a bit in the square, stopped in the Cathedral to visit."

"You, in the Cathedral?"

Axel shrugged. "Even a sinner must speak to the Lord at times."

"You're sure you weren't with Josef? I don't think he would have tried this alone, without witnesses."

"I would have stopped him if I'd been along." He dropped to his

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knees beside the body, unmindful of the blood that quickly soaked into his pants.

"Don't touch the body!" Inspector Storia cautioned in a commanding voice. "This is still a criminal investigation."

Michael frowned. "Is flying against the law?"

"No, but witchcraft is. Whatever went on here tonight, I mean to get to the bottom of it." He stooped to pry something—a torn piece of paper—from the dead man's fist.

"What's that?" Michael asked.

"A paper with the word 'pevole' printed on it."

While the photographers and police technicians labored, Michael followed Axel out of the building. He caught up with the slender man halfway across the square. "I have some things to ask you," he said.

"About herbs and healing, that I know. About flying and falling, those subjects are foreign to me."

"What did you mean when you said the women put him up to it?"

"The women. Elsa, and that Fileno woman, and the Petrie sisters and the rest. He spent too much time with them. I think he was with them tonight."

"Oh? Did they encourage him in his fancied flights?"

"I don't know. I stay away from them. Ask Elsa Mancini."

"I will."

Michael sent a message back to his friend Captain Segar, asking him to deliver word of Josef Patronne's death to his brother Henrik in Gravita. There was little chance Henrik would claim the body or journey to Milan for the funeral. Josef had long ago cut his ties with the Gypsy family back home. He was a wizard now and perhaps he would be buried as one, with his friend Axel sprinkling life-giving herbs across the lid of the coffin.

In the morning, Michael went to see Elsa Mancini at her apartment. At the door she hesitated, remembering him from the previous day, but now her husband was at home and she allowed Michael to enter. Davide Mancini was lounging at the kitchen table in his undershirt, a middle-aged man beginning to run to fat. He glanced curiously at Michael, noting the gold earring, and said, "This another of your Gypsy friends, Elsa?"

"I don't know him. He came here yesterday with questions about Josef Patronne." She turned back to Michael. "What is it now?"

"Patronne is dead. He fell from the top of the Galleria last night."

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The woman crossed herself at the news, while her husband merely took another sip of his morning coffee. "Was he trying to fly?" she asked. "He talked of it sometimes."

"The police don't know. It's a possibility. Someone told me he might have been with you earlier last evening."

"I did not see him. I had some women friends in for a game of cards." She motioned toward the living room, where Michael could see three card tables still set up with chairs around them. There were half finished drinks and ashtrays still about.

"A large group," he commented.

"A dozen of us. We get together for cards once a month."

"And drive me out of the house," her husband complained. "I come back at midnight and the place isn't even cleaned up."

"We played late," Elsa explained.

Michael remembered some of the other names Axel had mentioned. "Was Ida Fileno here?"

"She came late, after she finished at the hospital."

"And the Petrie sisters?"

"Yes, they were here. Why do you ask?"

Michael had strolled into the room to look at the card tables. On one, a deck of cards still rested on an unused score pad. "I was only wondering. They are names I've heard."

"We are all friends."

Michael nodded, preparing to leave. "But you saw nothing of Patronne last night?"

"Nothing."

Michael reached out and cut the deck of cards, turning over the top half. He almost expected to see one of the death cards, perhaps the queen of spades.

Instead he saw the ten of swords. It was a tarot deck.

Michael lingered in a cafe down the street that afforded a good view of Elsa Mancini's apartment building. About an hour after his visit, he saw Elsa's husband come out the front door and start up the block with one of their children, a boy of nine or ten. He followed them to a playground some two blocks away. The boy joined in a game with some friends while Davide unfolded the morning newspaper and sat down on a bench to read it. Michael went up and sat next to him. Davide did not notice him at first, then said, "You again!"

"I saw you here and thought we might talk for a bit."

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"I have no time for Gypsies," Mancini replied.

"It's about your wife and Josef Patronne."

"Why should I talk to you? Are you the police?"

"No, only a friend of Josef's brother. When I go back home to Romania, I want to be able to tell Henrik how Josef died."

"Ask the police, don't ask me."

"I want to know about your wife's card games. What happens at them?"

Davide shrugged. "They play cards—and gossip, I suppose. How should I know, when then send me away?"

"There were tarot cards on the table. Those are used for fortune-telling and the black arts."

"You credit my wife with powers well beyond her. Tarot cards are also used for Austrian tarock, a popular game in the north of Italy and other parts of Europe. It's a game for three players but it can be adapted for four. Elsa and her friends have three tables so that a dozen of them can play at once."

Michael shook his head. "I know tarock. It's played with a fifty-four-card mixed deck of tarot and regular playing cards. The deck on the table was a full seventy-eight-card tarot deck. They weren't playing tarock."

"Well, then, perhaps it was tarocco. That's played with a full tarot deck."

"But by only three players."

"You know your cards, Gypsy."

"What were Elsa and her friends doing last night? Was Patronne with them?"

"How should I know? Ask her, not me."

"You are a superstitious people in this region. Witchcraft flourished here once. I'm sure you know what a coven is."

Davide's eyes narrowed as he studied Michael's face. "A group of witches led by a high priest or wizard. The traditional number is thirteen. Twelve witches and—"

"And Josef Patronne?"

Davide jumped to his feet, anger written across his face. "What are you saying about Elsa? Why do you make up these lies?" He called out to the child at play. "Come, Arturo—it is time to go home!"

There was no point in pursuing them. Michael decided he'd already said enough—or too much.

He found Inspector Storia at the Galleria. The detective was smoking another thin cigar, studying the glass roof and the sky beyond.

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"They tell me, Gypsy, that there is a Galleria in Toronto, in Canada, that is patterned after this one."

"It's an impressive place here," Michael agreed.

"We have the autopsy report on your friend Patronne."

"Oh?"

"There was some sort of drug in his system. A sedative."

"Something to calm his nerves before he tried to fly?"

"According to the autopsy, he couldn't have walked, much less flown."

Michael shook his head. "I don't understand. How did he climb up to the roof?"

"He didn't. He was already unconscious when somebody carried him up there and pushed him over the railing."

"You're saying he was murdered?"

"Yes."

Michael Vlado was not as certain about it as the inspector seemed to be. He'd known Gypsies to perform amazing feats of strength and endurance while under the influence of alcohol or drugs. He could imagine Josef Patronne swallowing the sedative as a preliminary part of some bizarre ceremony and then launching himself from the Galleria's glass ceiling while his coven watched. Or was he conjuring up demons where none existed? Was there a simpler explanation for what had happened?

He found Axel Tortero on the street near the cafe, in animated conversation with a dark-haired young woman. Watching as Axel gestured and waved his hands, Michael found it hard to believe that Axel and Josef could have been close friends. Why, he wasn't sure. They came from different cultures, after all, and there was only the nebulous fraternity of wizardry to unite them. But perhaps that was enough.

When he approached the couple, the woman immediately backed off a few feet, frowning. "Who are you?" she asked. "I saw you at the playground with Elsa's husband."

"I'm Michael Vlado, a friend of Josef Patronne's brother in Romania."

She nodded. "I am Elsa's friend, Ida Fileno."

"I was going to come by and speak with you at the hospital."

She shrugged uncertainly. "This is my day off. What did you want to talk to me about?"

"Actually, it was before Josef's death that I wanted to talk. His

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brother back home had read about his trip to Rome with the other wizards. He feared Josef might be having mental problems."

"He may have been right," Ida said, nervously twisting the wedding ring on her finger. "Josef often acted strange."

"You knew him well?"

"I—my daughter was friendly with him. She's just at an age where all this supernatural business intrigues her. Ghosts and witches—and wizards."

"He came to your house?"

"The children knew him from the playground. And the Galleria. He taught an informal class at his apartment, filling their minds with wild ideas. Axel here was nearly as bad with his herbs."

Axel scowled, still angry with her. "You and Elsa tried to get him arrested! He was only teaching religion!"

"Not the religion of our churches." She turned away, ending the discussion. "He is dead now. It is past arguing about."

"Did you play cards with Elsa Mancini last night?" Michael asked her.

"Cards? Yes, we played. We play every other week at someone's home." Her mind seemed to be far away.

"With a tarot deck?"

"What?"

"I saw a tarot deck at the Mancini apartment."

"Oh, that." She waved it away. "One of the Petrie sisters was telling fortunes after the game. You know—the sort of things Gypsies do," she said pointedly. "How many babies we can expect and whether or not our husbands really love us?"

Michael nodded. "Yes, I know about fortune-telling with tarot cards. Patronne wasn't there, too, was he?"

She turned her deep-brown eyes toward him. "Why should he have been there?"

"Perhaps to instruct you, to lead you as he did the children."

"No." She shook her head. "You are wrong, Mr. Vlado."

She walked away from them and Axel watched until she rounded the next corner. "There's a cool one," he said. "She knows more than she tells."

"Was Josef part of it?" Michael asked. "You know, don't you? Was it a coven? Twelve witches and a wizard?"

Axel backed away from him. "What gave you that terrible idea? Josef never practiced black magic or Satanic rites!"

"Are you certain?"

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Axel turned and broke into a run. Michael started after him and then let him go. He went looking for Inspector Storia again and finally located him at the police station on the Corso Magenta. Storia had his necktie off and was drinking a cup of hot coffee as he read through some reports. "What is it now, Gypsy?" he asked.

"That piece of paper you found in Josef's hand—could I see it?"

"It's in the file. I have too much else on my desk to worry about that." But he rose from the desk with some reluctance and pulled open a file drawer. "Here it is."

Michael took the plastic envelope and studied the slip of paper with 'pevole' printed on it. "It might be someone's name," he suggested. He noticed that though three sides of the paper were sharply cut as if by a scissors, the fourth side by the letter 'p' was torn jaggedly.

"No, we checked the telephone directory," Storia told him. "It's not a name."

"What, then?"

"Who knows?" The inspector took the envelope from Michael and returned it to the file. "I have to leave now. They need my testimony in a trial."

Michael stared at the detective. Something—

"Come on, you have to go now," Storia insisted.

"An idea's just come to me, Inspector."

"Ideas we get all the time. Bring me some evidence and I'll listen."

He disappeared into the elevator and Michael watched the doors slide shut behind him.

Michael found Elsa Mancini shopping at the open-air vegetable market near her apartment. "It's you again," she said, not unkindly. "I thought you'd have left for home by this time."

"I will be leaving soon," he confirmed. "I had to see you once more, to tell you I made a bad mistake about you. I told a couple of people I thought you were a witch."

"A witch?" The statement seemed to take her by surprise. "Where on earth could you have gotten that idea?"

"There were twelve of you at your apartment last night, supposedly for a card game, but I knew you didn't play cards."

Elsa picked up a head of lettuce, weighing it speculatively. "How did you know that?"

"Because of the tarot deck on the table. The most common tarot games are three-handed, or else they're played with a mixture of

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tarot and regular cards. Also, you told me the group met once a month. Your friend Ida said it was every other week. It's an odd card club when the members can't agree on how often they play."

"So you thought we were witches?"

Michael nodded. "The Gypsy mind runs to superstition too easily, I suppose. A coven of witches led by the wizard Josef Patronne. It made perfect sense, except—"

"Yes?"

"Except that I was wrong. There is one other thing that twelve women might do besides playing cards and engaging in witchcraft."

She put down the lettuce and stared at him. "What would that be?"

"Serve as a jury."

"You're very clever, Mr. Vlado."

"Josef Patronne was tried and convicted by the twelve of you, and then he was executed for his crime. You injected him with a sedative, no doubt obtained by Ida Fileno from the hospital where she works, and then you carried him to the top of the Galleria and shoved him over the railing to his death. Everyone knew he'd talked of flying. It was a perfect way to kill him."

Elsa walked away from the vegetables, her face drained of color. "You're guessing. You have no proof."

"*I* haven't, but the police do. You wrote your verdicts on slips of paper. A torn portion of one slip was clutched in Josef's fist. It said 'pevole.' The entire slip would have read 'colpevole'—the Italian word for 'guilty.' "

"He *was* guilty!" she flared out. "Guilty of the worst of crimes! And the police would do nothing!"

"You went to them?"

"Time and again! We told Inspector Storia what he was doing to our children, twisting their minds with his tales of wizardry. He only laughed and promised to speak to Patronne. Then it became more serious. Two of our children were physically molested by him. Still the police did nothing. They thought we were lying, getting our children to invent stories merely to harass Patronne. That was when we decided on our own brand of justice. We held a trial, and even gave him a chance to defend himself. He was found guilty."

"I can't believe he did those things."

"He did them, all right. He admitted everything as he tried to storm out of my apartment last night. Ida used a hypodermic on him, as you guessed. We wrapped him in a rug and carried him to

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the Galleria. There we took the elevator to the top floor where one of the women worked. We pushed him out a window."

"I'll have to tell the police about this," Michael warned.

"Tell them. I'm not sorry for what we did. We'd do it again to protect our children."

Michael slowed his pace and watched her walk on alone. He wondered what he should do, and what he should tell Patronne's brother back home.

In the morning, he stopped at the police station before leaving Milan. Inspector Storia was busy. There'd been a shooting overnight, and a jewelry-store robbery. "Go away, Gyspy," he told Michael. "I have no time for you now."

"It's about Patronne's death."

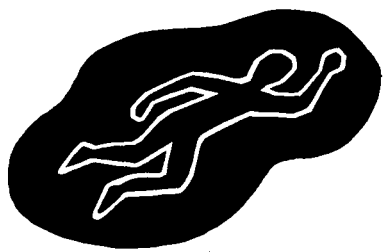
The inspector reached for a ringing telephone. "That case is closed."

"Closed?"

"We don't have the manpower to pursue every unexplained death. My superiors have ruled it accidental."

"But—"

Storia waved Michael away. "After all, he was only a Gypsy. And a wizard besides."



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a *NEW* jurisprudence story by

ROBERT TWOHY

The front of the bill showed nothing in particular. On the back, on the right side in the mostly white area, was a neat drawing in soft black pencil of a woman's face, 3/4 angle—crooked smile, tippy nose, croppy hair. She looked like a real person, the artist's true love maybe.

With this story, all the evidence is in—Robert Twohy is one of our most prodigious crime writers, his style and substance defying comparison, digging deep—and hitting pay dirt . . .

THE TEN-DOLLAR BILL

by ROBERT TWOHY

Headline: LINDENVALE WOMAN VICTIM OF SLASHER. Under it a photo: broad face, nice smile, dark hair, dark and lively eyes—Thera Michaels, 36, the slashed.

In B's Coffeetime near the Courthouse, I got coffee and settled at a table to find out about this latest north-Peninsula murder.

—Five slashes through the throat, done by a sharp long-bladed knife, 2:00–4:00 A.M., was the M.E.'s guess. No such weapon found on the scene, which was #8, a studio apartment at 586 Myrtle, second floor rear.

About 9:30 the apartment manager, Enid Vollmer, 52, had come rapping, she and Thera having a date for Macy's Hillsdale, a big sale beginning 10:00 sharp—

Rappity-rap-rap. No response. "Thera?" She turned the knob, pushed, the door opened, she stepped in.

Thera's bankbook showed that she had drawn $150.00 from her checking account yesterday, Wednesday, no doubt for the raid on

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Macy's. A twenty-dollar bill lay under the foot of the bed, no other money on the premises except a scatter of silver less than $2.00.

It looked like the killer, grabbing her money, had dropped the $20.00, which had wafted under the bed. Departing, he—or she?—hadn't pushed the button on the inside knob that would have locked the door.

The victim had worked occasionally as a waitress at local cocktail lounges. "Occasionally" hinted another occupation, not stated.

After looking closely at the photo, I decided I'd never known the lady, under any name, in any Peninsula town.

That was May 3.

Next afternoon, same place, *Daily Register* and coffee before me: ARREST IN LINDENVALE SLASH MURDER.

Photo: bony cheeks, short light hair, long thin nose, small tight mouth, deep-set wary eyes—Warren Larabee, 27, itinerant.

How had they nailed him so fast? I read and found out.

By noon Thursday, Lindenvale cops were checking Thera's known haunts. At the Tropical Club on Grand they learned that she had stopped late last night, leaving about midnight with a lanky type in a crummy blue jacket, described as in the photo, not known to anyone on hand.

Browsing low-grade hotels, about 4:00 P.M. they got to the Rich, 4th Street in San Mateo. The clerk there said the guy they were looking for sounded like a dude who had checked in last Saturday, April 28, taking a room for a week—W. Larabee, City.

They went to his room and he was out. Clothes appropriate for a drifter were flopped around, also an old suitcase. They didn't find a long-bladed knife. They lounged around the hotel.

About 5:30 a long, lean guy in a crummy blue jacket bounced out of a Yellow that pulled up at the hotel.

He said yes, he was the one who had gone home with the woman, but he hadn't done anything to her, or robbed her—when he left her place about 3:00 that morning she had been asleep and healthy. $173.00 was in his wallet. He said he'd had a big afternoon at Bay Meadows. The Yellow driver corroborated, said he'd picked him up at the track—the guy had bragged about three long-shot winners and paid two fives for a $6.20 ride.

They took Larabee to the Courthouse in Redwood and gave him and the money to a Sheriff's detective named Richard Morris, who I knew slightly. Morris had him tape a statement, detailing his night with Thera, his day at the races, and his background. Then he took

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him up a floor to County Jail, where he was booked on suspicion of robbery and murder.

That was Friday's story.

Saturday didn't bring one. Sunday the *Register* rests. Monday and Tuesday brought nothing.

Wednesday about 9:00 I forayed from my burrow on Marshall Street in Redwood to the phone at Arco on the near corner, and called my answering service. She said to call County Bar. I called County Bar and learned that my name topped the list of lawyers signed up to defend indigents, and was I free to take on Warren Larabee?

I was, and would be glad to serve. County wages beat no wages anytime.

Fifteen years back I was a young lawyer on the hustle, making money and developing a taste for sharp clothes, languorous women, and high-style wines—which hedonic life carried into the mid-seventies, when I made a career change, becoming an off-and-on bartender, cabdriver, and you-name-it, between drinks, detoxes, and stops at County Hospital.

November 15, 1981, a sourball medic there said I had three choices: interment, cremation, or sobriety.

I opted for #1 or #2 as more fun than #3, but that was just swagger, the guy had got through to me.

A while later I was back at law, beyond the age of hustle but with no particular regrets. Like W.S. said, life is improvisational theater, and we play various roles: I'd been the cocky punk, then the rocky drunk, now I'd be the sere and yellow leaf who had blown around the block a few times, and maybe learned some things.

I called the D.A.'s Office to find out who was the deputy D.A. on the Larabee case. —Milt Josten, he was around somewhere, hang on a sec—

I told him I'd been appointed to defend Larabee and when could I look over his material?

—Right now, if I wanted. He'd be out but the folder would be on his desk—

Alone in his cubicle, I got the folder, which contained the transcript of Larabee's taped statement, a bunch of reports, a rap sheet, front-and-back photostats of a ten-dollar bill, and a dozen $8 \times 11''$ color shots of the victim.

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Various angles and distances showed her on her back on a couch-bed, covers to her chest, eyes and mouth stretched wide, throat savaged, blood everywhere. I was glad again that I hadn't known her.

The front of the ten-dollar bill showed nothing in particular. On the back, on the right side in the mostly white area, was a neat drawing in soft black pencil of a woman's face, 3/4 angle—crooked smile, tippy nose, cropped hair. She looked like a real person, the artist's true love maybe.

A note was attached, signed by Richard Morris, which gave me bones of a scenario later fleshed out when I talked to the featured bartender.

Gifted with the $173.00 by the arresting cops, Morris had marked the bills and slid them into his desk. Sunday he thumbed through them, looking for whatever, and the pretty girl grinned at him crookily.

He took her to various of Thera's Lindenvale haunts. At the Moonduster on Lawton the day man said, oh, yeah, he'd given that bill to Thera as change for a twenty late Wednesday afternoon.

How'd he know? Because she'd called his attention to it. —"Hey, Larry, look at this bill you just gave me! She looks just like I used to look!"

He wasn't going to argue. "That right?"

"I'm gonna take it to a photo shop and have 'em blow it up, and get it framed! She's so much like I was I could cry!"

Morris, later I, asked Larry Taylor if he was sure the meeting was late Wednesday afternoon. —Yes, because it was his last chat with Thera. Next morning came word she was dead.

She had left the Moonduster about 6:00. About midnight she left the Tropical with Warren Larabee. Sometime early next morning she was slashed and robbed. About 5:30 P.M. the bill was among others lifted from Larabee's wallet.

For the next hour I read, made notes—

Thera's kitchen knives had tested negative for blood, as had all Larabee's clothes, his shoes, suitcase, wallet, and the money.

Male tenants of 586 Myrtle were a retired guy, two older married guys, and two younger guys, one married. Any or all could have been clients of Thera, though all denied. The five women in the place, including the widow Vollmer, said they hadn't been clients, either.

Nobody had heard sounds in the night except young Mrs. Black,

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in #6 next to Thera, who reported hearing Thera's toilet flushing late, she didn't know when—she barely heard it but thought she had.

Which was irrelevant, or maybe not. Maybe she had heard Thera trying to scream as she had her throat slashed.

A Yellow nightdriver said that Thursday about 3:40 A.M. he had spotted a rangy dude tracking south on Grand, who had waved him off. Which checked with Larabee's taped statement and didn't help or hurt him.

His statement indicated a drifter and a drinker, with frequent arrests for pipsqueak stuff and one sentence for armed robbery in L.A. when he was fourteen, resulting in three years in Juvenile. Since then, four months of county time was the longest he'd pulled. The rap sheet backed that up.

A note said that an outside back stairway led up to the second floor of 586, a door at the top with a bolt that didn't work and hadn't for a long time.

Returning the folder to the desk, I went to ground level and walked through the Courthouse to the rear elevator, and so to jail.

He got home from Juvenile and his mother was in County Hospital, dying of cancer. She recognized him, whispered, *Put your hand on my forehead and swear you'll never do another crime.* He swore.

"Ten years, and I've never broken that vow." Deep-set brown eyes were steady on mine, meaning nothing—a good liar develops a steady gaze.

In his statement, he hadn't talked of his mother except to say that she was dead, and he had no father or sibs.

He squatted at the far end of the $6 \times 10'$ conference cell, knees up, heels under his butt, a long, bony-faced guy in orange jail rompers.

He had told me he was in a one-man cell on Row A, which is mostly for heavy cases. The deputies were okay, food was okay, he had no complaints, wasn't a smoker, got westerns and detective books from the pushcart that came around, didn't need stamps or anything as he didn't write anyone, missed booze but not too much and he'd make up for that when he got out. Then he told me how he had sworn on his mother's head. Two days later she died.

"Sometimes she comes to me in a dream and says she's proud of me, that I've done good."

Which was nice. Could be true. I made a note—I might use the story, if we went to trial.

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I sat on a campchair, the only furniture in the cell, notebook on my knee. "Your mother died, you went on the drift—tell me about that." I wanted to get clues by his manner and tone as to what kind of witness he'd make.

He told how he'd drifted around the Coast, odd-jobbing—farm work mostly—getting county aid sometime, hooking up with a girl sometime, mostly loning it. Since L.A. had been four d-and-d's, one defrauding an innkeeper, two vags, two public indecencies. Not indicating criminal tendencies or any logical reason he should be put back in circulation.

Last April he had worked for a farmer outside Eureka, digging an irrigation ditch, earning $300.00 for a job well done, said the farmer when contacted by a local deputy on Morris's request. Similar good reports came from other former employers he had named. If anyone in his past was down on him, Morris hadn't found the guy.

Late April he bussed to the City, to spend his money and fool around. His first night, he fell off a cable car parked at Powell and Market, curled up where he lay, and slept. Cops took him to jail.

Next morning, Saturday, April 28, they urged him onward. He bussed down the Peninsula and, at the Rich, took a room for a week.

"Go over that, will you?" The clerk there had told cops that he knew for a fact that after laying out $70.00 for his room, W. Larabee had had less than $90.00. I wasn't clear how the clerk had known that.

"I put out a hundred-dollar bill. He said he was fresh out of change. I cleaned my wallet and pockets—fifty-eight dollars—which he took, and said to give him the balance when I got the C changed, which I did."

So, paid up for a week, with less than $90.00, he figured he'd look for work on the Peninsula and if he didn't find any, would head out for farm country.

He drank through the weekend. Monday he lay around. Tuesday he job-hunted if he did, not finding anything. Wednesday he bussed to the coast, walked on the beach, drank some—Wednesday night he went up to Lindenvale, to the Tropical.

"Why'd you go there?"

"Got the urge. Doesn't happen often, I'm undersexed I think—okay thing to be, in jail." He grinned, so did I. "I asked a cabdriver if he knew a place and he took me there."

Thera Michaels, big and pretty, floated his way, let him know she was between engagements. —How much? Twenty dollars. They

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walked three blocks to her place and up the back stairs, through the door with the jammed bolt, and into #8.

"Did you pay her?" Yes, a twenty-dollar bill. She put it under the foot of the bed.

"Leaving you how much?" A ten, two fives, three singles—twenty-three bucks. He was paid through Friday at the hotel—figured to head out Saturday.

"After bus fare you'd be about broke."

"Nothing new."

"Okay. Then what?"

"We went to bed."

"Then you fell asleep?"

"Yes. She said okay, but to be out before dawn. I woke up, the clock on her bureau said almost three. She was asleep. I got up, dressed, left, walked to the bus stop on Grand, saw after a while there weren't going to be any buses, walked down Grand to the hotel." A three-mile walk.

I made notes, then: "Go back to when you left her. You pulled the door shut behind you?" Yes. "Didn't lock it?"

He spread a hand. "Thought it locked on its own—y'know, pull a door shut and it's locked."

"Not hers. There's a button on the inside you have to push—you didn't do that?"

"No, just pulled it shut."

"You walked down Grand. A cabdriver says he saw you."

"Yes. He cruised me but I waved him off. Couldn't afford him." Or didn't want to be peered at up close.

He got to the Rich, went to his room, slept. Around 10:00, he was at the doughnut shop a few doors east of the Rich—same time as the cop-photographer was setting up to make portraits of dead Thera.

He had coffee, looked over a morning *Chronicle* sporting green someone had left, glanced at the racing page—felt a sting of excitement, like this could be his day.

"Are you a horse player?"

"Like sex—infrequent. But I had this weird feeling I was going to hit, if I played five."

"Is five your lucky number?"

"No, means nothing to me. That's why I got excited. It was like a clear signal—play five." He licked his lips. His eyes had a sparkle, like reliving the moment—I got no sense of an act.

There are dumber ways to play the horses than by a number that

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hits you. He asked someone how to get to Bay Meadows, bussed there, put a five on #5 in the first, won $40-plus.

"How much did you have just before you placed that first bet?"

"Seventeen bucks."

So after winning the first race on #5, he had $55–60.00 to play with.

Thursday, May 3, a day for #5 longshots—three winners, he was on all three. From second through ninth races, he played #5 across the board, varying amounts. When the last race was run, having splurged on a Polish sandwich, a chiliburger, and five–six beers, he had $183.00. The cabdriver got $10.00 and Richard Morris got the rest, including a tenner with a mischievous-looking girl on the back.

I asked him about her.

He sighed. "Monday the detective came around and showed me the bill. All I could say was that somebody must have put it at the track, 'cause that's the only place I could have got it."

Anything's possible.

I went to the steel door and rapped a quarter against the wired window. You do that until a passing deputy opens. Sometimes he doesn't feel like it. Then you rap some more. Eventually you're sprung.

This time, one rap and the door popped.

The deputy took Larabee back to his cell. I went down to the lobby and sat in an armchair, thinking of things.

In California, murder in commission of another crime qualifies for death row. So does murder of a witness to another crime.

The idea that Thera's killer (not Larabee) had also gone to the track Thursday, along with 4–5,000 other fans, and bet Thera's $10.00, which wound up in Larabee's wallet, was one I didn't really want to lay out for a jury.

The climate is bad for murder defendants in California these days.

I got up and called the D.A.'s Office and Josten wasn't there, and wouldn't be until Monday. I asked the lady to leave word that if free Monday morning at 9:00, and in his space, he'd see me.

On the weekend I went with a friend in her car to the low Sierras, above Sacramento, and soaked up California's rowdy, gold-crusted historical sites, with not a thought for Larabee's problem, which was his not mine until Monday at 9:00.

Milt Josten raised his pale, flattish face and glinted his glasses at me and showed his teeth. I showed mine and sat.

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I said that unless I was missing something his case seemed about 90 percent the pretty-girl tenner.

He didn't say I was or wasn't.

I mentioned the non-secured door at the top of the back stairs, and that Thera had lived in the building three years, previously in other Peninsula towns, plying her ware and meeting all kinds of sports, including no doubt a proportion of sickos. I pointed out that five slashes could suggest a crime of passion, rage, or hate, or thwarted love.

I commented on tenants of 586. I said I knew Morris and other sleuths had talked to all of them, also all known clients of Thera, past and recent, and dug up nothing suggestive, but it was too bad that there was no physical evidence, like bloodstains or a weapon that could be tied to anyone. It left everything without a focus, kind of—so many possibilities, considering the back door.

He murmured, "One advantage to having only one big piece of evidence—it looms."

"The ten-dollar bill, you mean. It looms over the robbery, not the murder."

"You think Larabee robbed her while she slept, then after he left someone else sneaked in and killed her?"

"Possible. Also possible that he didn't rob her, but got the ten at the track—or a different ten, drawn by the same artist."

He showed his teeth. "What d'you think the odds are against that?"

"I'm not sure. Might depend on how it's looked at, if we come to trial."

If was the key word in that comment. Leaving it hang, I came in under it: "The particular ten links him to the robbery. But reasonable doubt is all over the murder—considering the back door, and Mrs. Vollmer finding Thera's door not locked. Just about anyone could have got in and slashed her."

We looked at each other a while. He knew what I was saying, not openly and straight-out, because lawyers train themselves to slide around a point so that later if it doesn't work out they can deny they ever made it. I was telling him I'd give him the robbery if he'd drop the murder charge, insufficient evidence.

He asked, "Have you put it to him?"

"No. I wanted your views first."

"All right. I'll tell you what I'll say in summation, if we come to trial."

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His *if* matched mine. We were in the same thought channel.

He had the ten-dollar bill but not much else—so this case was far from a lock, even for robbery, which I was offering him, dependent on client agreement and terms to be worked out.

At a trial he might win both ends, or lose both—I didn't think a jury would let Larabee walk, but you never know. And Josten didn't know. A double-loss would be a big smear across his record, if the current D.A. retires next year as he's hinting and Josten makes a run for the job, as he will.

Right now he wanted to give me a glimpse of his summation, so that when we got down to bargaining I'd have it in mind.

He said in his flat voice, "Larabee woke up, a little earlier than he says—say two-fifteen. She's asleep. He gets up, gets on his pants—gets the notion she might have money stashed. First he gets the twenty he paid her, probably from a drawer he's seen her put it in. Maybe the rest of her money is in that drawer, or another drawer, or under the bureau, the rug. Anyway, he finds it all and pockets it, dropping a twenty without knowing it—it sails under the bed.

"He glances her way—she's staring, mouth open to yell that she's being robbed, somebody call the cops—and he panics, snatches his knife from his pocket, desperate to stop her. Once started, he goes on slashing. Five slashes, blood spurting, he gets it in the face, hair, over his shoulders, chest, arms, hands. Leaning over the bed slashing, his pants and feet don't get splashed.

"Hurrying to the bathroom, he scrubs clean, washes the knife, dries himself and the knife with a towel from the hamper there, leaves the bathroom, careful to avoid blood on the rug, finishes dressing, departs.

"That's what happened at Thera's that morning."

His voice hasn't taken on any tone, as it wouldn't if he laid that scene out for a jury. He's not emotional or fiery. Talking neutrally of horrible happenings can make them stand out sharp—if you know what to put in and leave out, as he does.

I was quiet a while. Then: "What'd he do with the knife?"

"Dropped it in a trash can outside, or down a drain, or in the back of a pickup parked on Grand—anywhere."

"If he killed and robbed her, why didn't he leave town? Why go to the races?"

"He was paid at the Rich through Friday night. If the cops came

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looking for him, and he was gone, it'd look bad. He went to the races because he'd come into money, and felt lucky."

With nothing more to say until I'd talked to my client, I got up, said I'd get back to him, and departed.

We each had a chair this time. I laid out how I saw the situation.

He got up, walked to the door, leaned on it, said over his shoulder, "You want me to confess a robbery I didn't commit."

"No. You don't confess anything. You accept the deal, if you do, as best thing in the circumstances."

"What would be the sentence?"

"We haven't got to that."

He turned. "Give me a number."

"Six." More likely nine or ten, before parole consideration—but I wanted to deal, best thing in the circumstances.

He walked a while, small mouth tight, deep eyes bleak. I said, "The climate's not good. The public thinks they have to get tougher on crime—or if they don't think that, the media tells them they do, so they think they should. Juries are the public. They'd have you and no one else—they'd have the ten-dollar bill, the photos of Thera, her bloody nightgown, etcetera, the M.E.'s estimated death time, your statement as to when you left, your background."

He walked to the end wall, leaned on it, and gazed at me. "If I say no, we don't deal?"

"Your choice."

He came and sat, said quietly, "Do you know when a man's lying?"

"Sometimes. Not by look so much as tone."

"D'you think I've lied to you?"

"No."

"Did I say my mother comes to me in a dream sometimes, and smiles?"

I nodded. It was beside the point I was trying to get across, but it was his point, and he wasn't having mine.

I got up, so did he. "If you don't want to defend me, I'll ask them for someone else," he said.

"Do you want someone else?"

"No. You believe me. I think you'll get the jury to."

He put out a hand, smiled.

His eyes were clear and steady. Innocence was his shield. His mother came to him in dreams, and smiled . . .

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Josten was out. Tuesday I called him, said I'd talked to Larabee and we'd go to trial.

He said chipperly, fine, he'd set it as soon as possible.

Shortly the date was set, six weeks henceward, Homer T. Carlyle to grace the throne.

I did this and that. I talked to tenants of 586, including Lady V. and pretty young Mrs. Black. I talked to bartenders, including Larry Taylor, cabdrivers, you-name-its, ladies of Thera's calling, asking all if they'd ever heard her express fear of anyone. Nobody had. Nothing I learned changed the picture of the case as I'd got it on first reading in Josten's cubicle.

No one I talked to had ever seen a bill with a similar drawing.

I went to Bay Meadows and talked to cashiers and sandwich and beer merchants, and no one said he or she had handled a bill like I was interested in, not May 3, or anytime, far as they knew. I wrote some letters and got some responses. I told Larabee to be himself on the stand, not to wonder what was in Josten's mind when he asked questions, just to answer truthfully and simply. He said he would.

Came pretrial maneuvers. I proposed that the murder charge be dropped for lack of evidence. Josten said it was linked too tight to the robbery to be peeled away. Carlyle said we'd go ahead with both charges.

June 27, a Wednesday, Warren Albert Larabee, farm worker, clean and barbered and in a nice-fitting grey suit I'd got for him at Goodwill, came to trial in Courtroom R, 8th floor Courthouse, for the murder and robbery of Thera Elena Michaels, former occasional cocktail waitress.

Josten said that the prosecution would prove that she had woke up and caught the defendant in the act of robbery, so he killed her to silence her. He said it in more detail but that was the gist.

He didn't ask the death penalty, no doubt thinking his one piece of evidence, though solid, wouldn't quite carry the weight.

The rest of Wednesday and into Thursday he spent establishing that murder and robbery had been committed. He used the death photos, Thera's bloody nightgown and blankets, and her bankbook—and for witnesses the M.E., various cops and detectives, and a bank clerk. Then came the night man at the Tropical and various patrons, to point out Larabee as the lanky buckaroo Thera had settled beside and had a drink with and led out into the night. I let them all step down as I had the previous bunch.

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Young Mrs. Black climbed up. "You'd heard Thera's toilet flushed before?" Yes. "Was it the same sound?" Well, not quite so loud maybe, she didn't really hear it clear. "Describe the sound of that night, please." Low, soupy, kind of gurgly.

Josten nodded soberly, glanced at the jury, then at my client—with his deep-set eyes, small tight mouth, and ropy, farm-laborer hands. —I let her go, too.

Next came the nighthawk who had spotted the lanky guy in the blue jacket striding south on Grand at 3:40 A.M. He peered at Larabee and mumbled that he hadn't really seen his face and couldn't be sure.

Josten asked if I'd have my client stand and come clear of the defense table. The crummy blue jacket was on the evidence table and had been shown to the witnesses from the Tropical, and identified by them. Now Josten wanted Larabee to take off the nice jacket he had on and put on the blue jacket and look like the seedy bum he'd been that night.

I stipulated that he was the guy the witness had seen that night, averting that bit of hokum.

Josten shrugged. "The reason you didn't see his face, was it because he turned away when you drove up beside him?" Yes.

I let him go, like the point was too meaningless to bother with, I'd get to it later.

All that took us through Thursday.

Friday, Mrs. V. led off with how she found the body. I had some questions for her, bringing up the matter of the back door. How long had the bolt not worked? Pretty long. Why wasn't it fixed? She didn't know—she'd told the owner but he hadn't fixed it. So anyone could have come up those back stairs anytime and walked into the building? She guessed so. "Were you and Thera friends?" Yes. "Did she ever express fear of anyone she met in her work?" No. "Were any of your other tenants her clients?" She didn't know or care—Thera never talked about her business and she never asked her.

Josten got her back. Had there ever been a crime on the premises before Thera moved in? Not that she knew. Had there ever been a crime *after* she moved in, before May 3? No.

A Lindenvale cop told how he had arrested Larabee, counted $173.00 from his wallet, and given wallet and money to Richard Morris of the Sheriff's Department. He identified the wallet.

Richard Morris, a slight, shy-looking guy who lunches on hoods, took the stand and told how he had marked each of the bills and put

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them in his desk drawer, which he locked, and how Sunday, riffling them, he had spotted the pretty girl. That bill was handed him to identify, then to the jury to pass around.

The detective was led on to the Moonduster and Larry Taylor. Then he stepped down and Larry had his moment of glory.

I asked him if he'd ever handled another bill with a drawing like that on it and he said no, not that he remembered—but he admitted he seldom looked at the back of a bill. Which got me nowhere but planted the possibility in the jury's mind of a similar bill, which I'd bring up in summation maybe.

Josten nodded that Morris should resume the stand, but Carlyle asked him to hold off as it was almost noon and we'd break until 1:30.

I got coffee from a machine and sat in the patio behind the Courthouse, thinking how my problem was pretty much as Josten had said—one big piece of evidence, the ten-dollar bill, looming.

I watched a tough-looking bug lounging around under a bush, waiting for someone to come around he could eat. Bugs are basic types—so are lawyers, under the baloney. Eat or be eaten.

Nobody came around to be eaten, or to eat. As my watch said 1:25 I left the bug to work out his future without me and went back to the courtroom.

Richard Morris returned to the stand. The bailiff had set up a recorder. Morris told how he had taped a statement by Warren Larabee on May 3. The tape was played. The jury, refreshed by lunch, listened interestedly.

Tape finished, Josten and Morris discussed Larabee's arrest record, with concentration on the armed robbery, the implication being that a guy who does heavy crime once often does it again.

Morris lingered for questions from me. I asked if anything Larabee had told him had been proved a lie. He said no.

That was it for the case of *People vs. Larabee*. It was 2:25 and my turn.

First I asked Carlyle to dismiss the murder charge. He said no.

Then I asked a postponement until Monday, thinking that if Larabee did well on the stand I didn't want the effect dissipated over the weekend. He said we'd proceed.

Then I read and submitted a letter from the Eureka farmer who spoke well of Larabee, said he was hard-working, never a problem though often drunk, and he'd never seen him with a knife. Another letter from another farmer said the same.

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Those two bombshells having failed to bring a directed verdict of acquittal, I nodded to my client, who took the stand.

One thing you can be sure—when your man gets up to talk, people listen.

I had him lay out his background, including the armed robbery and three years in Juvenile, which led into his vow to his dying mother—

It went well, I thought. He spoke simply and clearly. Plainly the vow meant a lot to him, as did memory of his mother.

I took him through the years that he'd never broken the vow. We talked of his numerous arrests. He was calm and factual, a good witness.

We covered Wednesday night with Thera. "Were there any problems when you got to her place?" No. "Everything went all right?" Yes. "You had no reason to dislike her, or be angry with her?" None. "Then you went to sleep for a while?" Yes. "She was asleep when you woke up?" Yes. "Did you take the twenty dollars that she had put under the bed?" No. "Did you take any other money?" No.

We lingered on details of his leaving, a little past 3:00, when he had pulled the door shut behind him without pushing the lock-button.

"Then you walked down Grand?" Yes. "The cabdriver said he came up beside you." Yes. "What did you do?" He had waved him off. "Did you turn your face away?" He didn't think so—maybe. He had no reason to look at him.

We talked about race day, his hunch on #5, his winnings and losses and what he had bought at the track, and his net profit. I was trying to make clear that his actions that day didn't relate to a man who had just committed a slash-murder, and a robbery.

"Did you kill Thera Michaels?" No. "Did you rob her?" No.

I turned him over to Josten.

He picked up the ten-dollar bill and walked around, flipping it against his off hand, gazing at Larabee with a sardonic lift of the lip. Larabee gazed back. Innocence was his shield.

"You say you vowed to your mother that you'd never commit a crime."

"Yes."

"How do you define a crime?"

"Uh—hurting someone. Taking something from someone. Telling a lie that gets someone in trouble."

"Telling a lie on the witness stand, to cover up a crime?"

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"Yes, I guess so."

"Is that what you've done today?"

"No."

Josten held up the bill. "You got this at Bay Meadows as part of your winnings that day—you've said that?"

"Yes, sir. As far as I know, that's how I got it."

Josten, partly turned to the jury, murmured, "Do you know the odds against that happening in real life?"

"Against what happening, sir?"

"You, an innocent man by your account, going to the track Thursday, May third, with thousands of other race fans, and receiving from one of the fifty or a hundred cashiers on duty the *same* bill—" cracking it hard "—that *another* man who came to Thera Michaels' within minutes of your leaving had stolen from her." His voice as he wound up was cold and driving but his hard stare wasn't at Larabee, but at the jury.

I objected on grounds that the question had turned into a statement, and anyway Larabee wasn't an expert on probability theory. Carlyle grunted, "No, but he might as well have a stab at it." He meant that I should have objected before Josten got in his comment, and as I hadn't I'd do better to let the point play itself out. He was right and I shut up.

Larabee said, "I don't know the odds, no. I just know that that's what must have happened."

"So you insist you got the bill at the track."

"As far as I know, yes."

"Is that answer as true as your answer to the other question I asked—that you've never broken your vow to your mother?"

I objected. I said asking the witness to compare his own answers for degree of truth was pernicious and intended to discredit.

Josten assured me that he wasn't asking for a comparison of truths, and smiled demurely at the jury.

Carlyle had his last question stricken, and on my request, his last snidery.

Josten walked away, flipping the bill against his chin. "Is your word as to how you wound up with this piece of money the truth?" Yes. "Is your word that you didn't kill Thera Michaels the truth?" Yes. "Is your word that you didn't rob her the truth?" Yes.

He nodded. "No more questions." He had done what he wanted—held up Larabee's account of how he got the bill as the standard by which the jury should assess all his responses.

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Carlyle looked at me.

I nodded that I had a followup. I hadn't done anything useful yet and this was my last shot. With nothing to lose, I'd bring back mother one more time to close out the defense.

I said slowly, "Everything you've said today would you say, as you said ten years ago, when she lay dying? If your mother were here, would you lay your hand on her head and would you say—"

I broke off as he said softly and clearly, "She is."

I stepped away so all the jury could see him. His face was a little raised and the deep-set eyes gazed off, and no tension showed.

"Say that again, please."

"She's here."

I looked at the jury. They sat still, eyes steady on him except a few eyes flitting around—searching for an aura, a sign?

A moment like that happens. You don't plan it, it can't be set up—it just happens, and you do with it as you can.

"Would you put your hand on her head, as ten years ago, and swear that everything you've said on the stand today is true?"

He lifted his right hand, moved it forward, not far, palm down, soft reaching fingers, soft quiet smile. "Everything I said today is true. Isn't it, Mother?"

That was as good as could be. Maybe you had to be there. The jury was there.

I walked back to my table.

I looked at Larabee and he was back from where he had been, hands on his knees, eyes calm and clear as he gazed back at me.

"Defense rests."

Carlyle glanced at Josten, who shook his head.

"Court adjourns until nine A.M. Monday. At that time, defense will give closing statement, followed by prosecution. Then I'll instruct." He tapped and that was it.

Two days would pass. The jurors, unsequestered, would go to their various abodes, gab with spouses, friends, lovers—not about the trial, of course, oh, no, perish forbid, they'd been enjoined, not a word to anyone about the trial. They'd cook, eat, drink, wash the car, walk the dog, watch TV baseball, make bedtime cocoa, bedtime whoopee—all kinds of lively and dull, bright and tiresome things they would do. And Monday, would anything be left of the feelings they'd had when Larabee put his hand out so lovingly and said what he said to his mother?

I'd find out . . .

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Monday, there they were, fifteen faces counting alternates, thirty windows to the soul that I wouldn't try to peer into. Early on as a lawyer I'd learned that I can't read juries.

I got up, walked around. They watched me through the windows.

"You want the truth of this case. Friday you saw this man lift his hand and swear on his mother's head. Go to the feelings you had then, to your memory of the feelings you had then. There lies the truth you're seeking, in your feelings of that moment."

I almost nodded to Carlyle that that was it, my summation—didn't. My biggest fault—as lawyer, sometime lover, one-time connoisseur of fine wines—I don't know when is enough. Rather, I know but go on anyway. Urge to fail, fear of success?

I moved on to a lecture on Reasonable Doubt. I talked of Thera, serving a dangerous profession. I talked of the unbolted back door. I pointed out that Larabee hadn't been caught in any lie, on the stand or before. I talked about odds. I said that odds against Larabee receiving the pretty-girl tenner at the track were enormous—"But so were odds against each of you being called to serve at this trial, you among several hundred thousand qualified county residents. How about *those* odds, Mr. Josten?" He shrugged, smiled.

I talked about a man being hit by a runaway truck. "What were the odds against him and the truck being on that street, at that second, in those few feet of space they had to be, in order to meet? Yet they did. And you are here, despite all odds, you the jury, deciding if Warren Larabee is telling the truth when he says that to his best knowledge he got the ten-dollar bill said to have been Thera Michaels' at the track that Thursday afternoon."

I stopped, gave silence a chance to operate, then went back to the note of feeling that I should have stayed with, or rather ended with. "Remember the defendant as you saw him Friday. Feel again what you felt then. You felt the truth."

That was it. I sat down.

Josten got up. In his flat voice he gave, at greater length, the scenario he had given me.

The jury listened. Larabee watched them closely for clues. I didn't.

Josten sighed. "Laws of probability—my opponent doesn't like them much. Figures. All right, put them aside for now. Let's go to facts. This case rests on this particular ten-dollar bill—" he picked it off the table "—found in Larabee's wallet. That is fact.

"He was in Thera Michaels' room at three A.M. and nobody else is known to have been there that night. *That* is fact. Wednesday,

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Thera possessed at least one hundred and fifty dollars—fact. Thursday, only twenty dollars was in her room and Warren Larabee had one hundred and seventy-three dollars in his wallet, including this bill." He held it up. "This is all fact."

He walked around, preliminary to wind-up. "Whether you look at this case from the standpoint of fact or probability, your conclusion must be the same."

He stopped walking. "I have said that the robbery and the murder are linked. Why? Because we can't believe that the same night, within a few minutes, two separate persons committed two separate and unrelated crimes on Thera Michaels. No, one man did both crimes." He gazed at Larabee. So did the jury. "There is the man. That is the fact."

Larabee gazed back at the jury.

"My opponent says forget probability, forget facts, go to feelings. I say consider everything first—*then* go to feelings. Consider this ten-dollar bill—"one more time "—consider the photos you've seen, the nightgown, the bloody blankets I've shown you, consider the odds I talked about, consider the words you've heard on the stand, then go to feelings, by all means." His voice was flat, low. "Feel for Thera. Feel her terror, her agony—then decide. Let this terrible crime be settled. Let her be at peace."

That was it—planned, constructed, carefully laid out and timed.

Carlyle spoke. He said the jury could link the crimes or not—if they thought separate verdicts were appropriate, they should bring back separate verdicts.

He talked about Reasonable Doubt, not contradicting anything I'd said but tightening the reins somewhat. When he was through, the concept didn't stretch quite so far as I'd stretched it, it had limits.

He talked about the ten-dollar bill. He talked about Larabee as a man who had told the truth or hadn't, which wasn't for the lawyers but for them to decide.

"It's now eleven-thirty," he said. "You will meet at one-thirty in the jury room to begin your deliberations." He tapped his hammer. Everyone sighed, stretched their faces, wheezed, honked, or were silent, and ambulated. The game had been played.

I murmured something to Larabee, who said, "Thanks for your best." We clasped hands.

He went off with the deputy to the jail elevator. I went to my burrow, crawled onto the couch, willed my mind blank, and went to sleep . . .

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Photos of Thera, her bloody nightgown and bedding, and a pretty girl's head on a ten-dollar bill meant more to the jury than an unbolted back door and Larabee's mother. The murder was horrible and the climate was bad.

You do what you do and afterwards groan for what you should have done or shouldn't.

For murder he got 25-to-life, for robbery 10 years, concurrent. No minimum to serve—before age fifty he should be out.

I saw him in Maximum, where a man under heavy sentence goes until prison. A deputy lets you in and stands near.

We shook hands through the bars. I said we'd appeal. He smiled like that was slightly humorous, as it was—said he had no regrets for turning down the deal, he couldn't agree to a lie. He'd make the best of prison and get through life and when that finally happened, his mother would take him and smile and tell him he'd done good, and been true to his vow.

If he had shed tears I'd have joined him. He didn't.

I went down to the lobby and called the D.A.'s Office. Josten was there. I said I had a thought I'd like to put out for him—I'd be in the basement restaurant.

Five minutes after I took a table he came in, spotted me, and strode over, dropping into the chair opposite.

I said, "Mrs. Black heard a toilet flush. A twenty-dollar bill was under the bed. From the start I felt Larabee told the truth. Those three points came together into a scene I'd like to fit into your scenario."

He raised his eyebrows, nodding me onward.

"He's in the bathroom, drying himself, with horrible visions of finding her money in a bureau drawer, jamming it into his wallet—glances, she's staring. He's leaping at her, slashing, blood spurts. Not so, can't be so, hallucination, he hadn't slashed, hadn't got all bloody—fantasy, a warning, a vision of the future that would have happened if he hadn't been sent the vision and turned away from the crime. He hadn't robbed or killed her, he knows that—in his wallet will be proof.

"He pulls it out—a ten, two fives, three singles. No money in his pockets. So he hasn't touched her money and hasn't slashed her.

"He goes out of the bathroom. She's asleep, bureau drawers are closed, the twenty's under the bed—all's well, he hasn't broken his vow. He leaves, pulling the door shut behind him."

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Josten had been leaning forward, knocking his chin slowly on folded knuckles as he watched me. "He didn't see her dead, blood everywhere?"

"He didn't want to. So he didn't."

He stopped knocking and sat back with a thin smile. "You really think that's possible?"

"I don't know. Let's say it is."

"Thera's money—he'd flushed it down the toilet?"

"Maybe."

"Why not put it back in the drawer?"

"Too much blood on the way there, which he'd have to look at, step around. In the bathroom his subconscious says no, down the drain with it—so down it goes, after he's peeled off a ten, two fives, and three singles."

"He did that subconsciously, I suppose." His tone was sardonic.

"Consciously. Then he blocked that out. As later he blocked out when he got rid of the knife, wherever, and the memory that he'd ever carried a knife."

"You have him jamming her money into his wallet so it's mixed up with his. Then his tenner went down the toilet, and he wound up with hers, the pretty-girl bill."

"Which never got bet or spent at the track, so you wound up with it."

He murmured, "Lucky me, unlucky him—or I guess you'll say it was destiny."

I shrugged.

He looked at his watch. "Why did you want to tell me this?"

"I don't know—so I could look at it, I guess. It's a happier ending than worrying if he's innocent, and somebody else killed Thera."

"Your worry, not mine."

"I like happy endings."

He pushed up from the table, gave me a long look. I smiled.

He shook his head slightly and walked away.

I flashed that it would be an even happier ending with booze in my cup.

Maybe my scene was right. Or he was a great liar who had conned me from the start. Or he hadn't killed her, somebody else had, he was innocent and I'd failed him.

I walked through the Courthouse and headed for Main Street, where the bars are.

You make a choice, but you're not stuck with it. You can change

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your mind. Right to the door of the dump, and up to the bar, you can change your mind.

With the drink in front of you, you still can.

But once in your mouth and down, no more choice. You're on your way to wherever, if you're like me.

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There was once a detective called Nero
Who quite often was cast as a hero—
A remarkable feat
For a person to meet
Whose mobility index was zero.

WIGGINS

by PEDRO J. SAAVEDRA

There once was a ragged street youth
Who free-lanced as a snoop for a sleuth.
"How uncouth!" Lestrade cried,
Wherein Wiggins replied:
"We're irregular, sir, not uncouth!"

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MONEYMAKING OPPORTUNITIES

$60.00 per Hundred securing-stuffing envelopes from home. Offer-details: Rush stamped self-addressed envelope. Imperial, P-460, X17410, Fort Lauderdale, FL 33318.

GOOD MONEY! Weekly! Processing mail! Free Supplies, Postage! No Selling! Information? Rush stamped envelope! Foodmaster-DCM, Burnt Hills, NY 12027.

PHENOMENAL WEALTH!!! "Consistently depositing $30,000 into your bank account every 3 weeks is the most exciting feeling in the world."—Free details...Wealth Builders of America, 6278 North Federal Hwy., Suite 408, Division IO:3, Ft. Lauderdale, FL 33308.

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EXCITING NEWS! Knowledge is the Key to Success. For more information write to: Barnes Publications, 1703 4th, Dept. EQ-4, Woodward, OK 73801.

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Classified Continued

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SAVE Hundreds, over 30 moneymaking opportunities exposed. Send $2.00 to: "Lowdown", 1205 Guerneville Rd., Santa Rosa, CA 95401.

GET RICH! Zero Investment. No Borrowing. Free Details. Money, 6520 Selma (#32Q37), Los Angeles, CA 90028.

THERE IS NO CHARGE FOR THE ZIP CODE: please use it when ordering merchandise from classified advertisements. You'll receive faster delivery.

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READ "How to Write a Classified Ad That Pulls," Instructive booklet tells how to write an effective classified ad. Also includes certificates worth $2.00 toward a classified ad in any of our publications. For your copy send $2.25 (includes postage) to I.M. Bozoki, Davis Publications, Inc., 380 Lexington Ave., New York, NY 10017.

ORIENTAL ladies seeking correspondence, marriage. Presentations by American husband, Filipina wife. Asian Experience, Box 1214T, Novato, CA 94948.

INSOMNIACS! Get no drug, no trick relief. SASE plus $2.00 to: Sleep, Box 17802, Mesa, AZ 85212.

PERSONAL—Cont'd

SINGLES, US/WORLDWIDE, seek enlightened correspondence, sincere friendships. SCANNA INTERNATIONAL-CO3, Box 4, Pittsford, NY 14534.

WITCHCRAFT Occult Miracle Power Secrets Gavin and Yvonne Frost. Now accepting students. 1502-AN, New Bern, N.C. 28560.

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ELLERY QUEEN

CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING ORDER FORM

Send to **ELLERY QUEEN MAGAZINE**
Classified Advertising Department/Suite 1401
380 Lexington Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017

15 WORD MINIMUM
Only $48.00 for 15 Words or Less
$3.20 each additional word
Capitalized words add—40¢ per word
SAVE 15% WITH 3 CONSECUTIVE MONTHS SAME COPY ORDER

DEADLINE: Copy and payment must be in by the 5th day of the third preceding month for issue in which ad is to appear.

(PLEASE PRINT OR TYPE)

YOUR NAME_____

FIRM (NAME IN AD)_____

ADDRESS_____

CITY_____ **STATE**_____ **ZIP**_____

PHONE:_____ **DATE:**_____

YOUR SIGNATURE_____

_____ Words at $3.20 each $ .....

_____ Capitalized word at .40¢ each _____
Total amount for 1 ad $

15% Savings with 3 Consecutive Months Discount

(a) Multiply one ad total $_____ x 3 = $ .....
(b) Multiply total amount on above line by x .85
(c) Total amount for 3 ads $

(Example: One 15 word ad $48.00 x 3 *months* = $144.00 x .85 = $122.40)

$_____ is enclosed for _____ insertion(s) in the _____ issue(s) _____ Heading

(FOR ADDITIONAL WORDS ATTACH SEPARATE SHEET)

(1) **$48.00**	(2) **$48.00**	(3) **$48.00**	(4) **$48.00**	(5) **$48.00**
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(11) **$48.00**	(12) **$48.00**	(13) **$48.00**	(14) **$48.00**	(15) **$48.00**
(16) **$51.20**	(17) **$54.40**	(18) **$57.60**	(19) **$60.80**	(20) **$64.00**
(21) **$67.20**	(22) **$70.40**	(23) **$73.60**	(24) **$76.80**	(25) **$80.00**
(26) **$83.20**	(27) **$86.40**	(28) **$89.60**	(29) **$92.80**	(30) **$96.00**

HOW TO COUNT WORDS: Name and address must be included in counting the number of Words in your ad. Each initial or number counts as 1 word: Mark Holly, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017: 7 WORDS: Zip codes are not counted. Phone #: 2 Words. Symbols used as keys are charged for. City or State count as 1 word each.: Garden City, New York: 2 words. Abbreviations such as C.O.D., F.O.B., P.O., U.S.A, 7x10, 35mm count as 1 word. (P.O. Box 145 count as 3 words) Webster's International Unabridged Dictionary will be used as our authority for spelling, compound words, hyphens, abbreviations, etc. **Please make checks payable to ELLERY QUEEN MAGAZINE.**

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13 *NEW* stories—including

ISAAC ASIMOV (about Griswold)
ANTONIA FRASER (about battlements)
EDWARD D. HOCH (about Rand)
GEORGE BAXT (about a stroke of genius)
JAMES POWELL (about wingtips)
WILLIAM BANKIER (about oil and water)
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CARL BARTEE ..... *Director of Manufacturing*
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LOUISE MUGAR ..... *Circulation Director, Retail Marketing*
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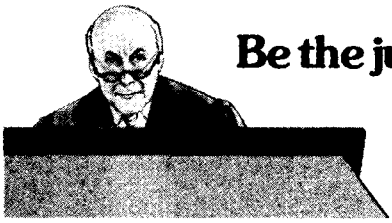

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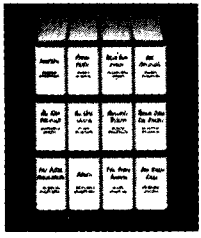

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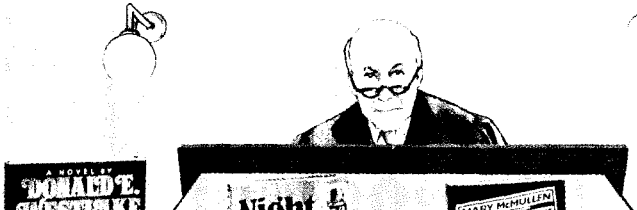

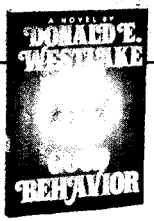

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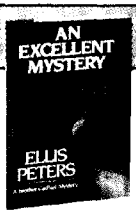

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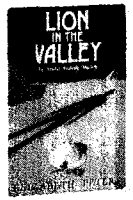

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